

## Colourful modifiers. How overt morphology restricts the distribution of Italian adjectives

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This study investigates the distribution of adjectives that do not inflect in Italian and shows that, irrespective of their interpretation, these are confined to the postnominal position. Supported by new quantitative evidence, we show that this pattern finds no satisfactory account in prominent analyses of Romance adjectives (Cinque, 2010; Laenzlinger, 2005). Specifically, we argue that this distribution cannot be captured by solely relating different orders to different types of movement of the noun. Rather, we take these data to suggest that different merge sites of the relevant adjectives are responsible for their distribution.

We restrict our attention to colour adjectives (CAs), which represent an ideal test-bed for three reasons: i) this class has a relatively rich number of non-inflecting elements (which can be argued to still be adjectives based on standard diagnostics, Cabredo Hofherr and Matushansky, 2010), ii) CAs all encode the same type of information, allowing us to exclude the role of lexical-semantics in regulating the ordering restrictions in question, and iii) they are a priori compatible with both a prenominal and a postnominal position, despite the former having a stylistically marked status. The relevant contrasts (first noticed by Zamparelli, 1994) are in (1-2):

- (1) Quest'opera describe **le (grigie) facciate (grigie) dei palazzi**  
This work describes **the.FPL grey.FPL facades.FPL grey.FPL** of.the buildings  
popolari.  
working-class  
"This work describes the grey facades of working-class buildings"
- (2) Poche spedizioni hanno esplorato **(gl)i (\*blu) abissi (blu) dell'**  
Few expeditions have.3PL explored **the.MPL blu.Ø abyss.MPL blu.Ø** of.the  
Oceano Pacifico.  
Ocean Pacific  
"Few expeditions explored the blue abysses of the Pacific Ocean"

In both sentences, the adjective gets an individual-level reading. As (1) shows, this reading is available for direct-modification adjectives in both prenominal and postnominal position (cf. Cinque, 2010). The crucial point is that the non-inflecting adjective *blu* 'blue' in (2) receives the same interpretation, but cannot appear before the noun. From a descriptive perspective, our claim is that the ability to inflect and show Concord with the head noun by itself determines whether an adjective can appear prenominally.

To corroborate the observation, we collected experimental data through an acceptability-judgement task with Italian L1 speakers. Given a suitable pragmatic and semantic context, we predicted inflecting adjectives like *rosso* 'red' to be possible in both pre- and postnominal position. On the other hand, we expected non-inflecting CAs like *blu* 'blue' to receive low acceptability scores in prenominal position, with the postnominal position being virtually the only option. As Figure 1 shows (next page), our expectations were borne out.

The four bars in the plot represent the mean acceptability scores on a 5-point Likert scale in the four conditions we tested. From left to right, these involve 1) postnominal inflecting CA (*facciate grigie* 'grey facades'), 2) postnominal non-inflecting CA (*abissi blu* 'blue abysses'), 3)

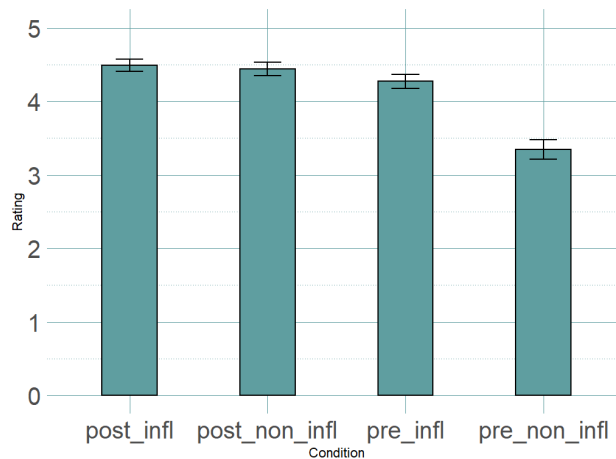


Figure 1: mean ratings on 5-point Likert scale across conditions

prenominal inflecting CA (*grigie facciate* ‘grey facades’), and 4) prenominal non-inflecting CA (*blu abissi*). As is clear from the graph, there is no difference in acceptability between inflecting and non-inflecting adjectives in postnominal position. On the other hand, the expected contrast emerges in prenominal position. Inflecting adjectives have the same mean score as in the first two conditions, while non-inflecting adjectives occurring in front of the noun (rightmost bar) are degraded. Crucially, the pragmatic context is the same in all cases, and the adjectives tested belong to the same lexical-semantic class. As such, the source of the observed difference cannot be semantic. Rather, the only systematic difference is whether or not the adjective can inflect.

These results thus support the broader claim that adjectives that don’t show Concord in Italian cannot appear before the noun. In the discussion, we argue that these results cannot be reduced to apparently similar phenomena like so-called ‘Lazy Concord’ (Nevins, 2011; Rasom, 2008; Savoia et al., 2018), and thus shed new light on the internal morphosyntactic complexity of the DP. More in general, our data represent a new contribution to the literature on the syntax of adjectives by bringing into the picture the role of morphosyntactic constraints, which is arguably still poorly understood in current approaches.

### Selected references

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