

French evaluative adjectives: position and interpretation

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We present three experiments on French multidimensional evaluative adjectives that partly replicate Kaiser & Wang (2021)'s study on English. We tested whether the subjectivity of these adjectives varies depending on their syntactic position, and by consequence their pragmatic status along the given-new and the (non-)at-issueness dimensions. Since in French evaluative adjectives can both be pre- and post-nominal, both positions were tested. Results showed the same tendency as in English for different positions to affect the perception of subjectivity. Nevertheless, no significant difference was found between the pre- and the post-nominal position, contrary to previous claims.

1 Introduction

In both French and English, adjectives can either be noun modifiers (*the amazing orchestra*) or they occupy a predicative position. An adjective in a predicative position can either occur in a matrix clause (*The orchestra was amazing*) or in a subordinate clause, specifically, in an appositive relative clause (*The orchestra, which was amazing, ...*). As pointed out by Kaiser & Wang (2021) (from now on, K&W), these three positions have an impact on the information-structural and discourse functions of the adjective. From the point of view of their at-issue/non-at-issue status, the predicate of a matrix clause is clearly at issue content; on the contrary, if we follow Potts (2005)'s analysis of appositive relative clauses (from now on, ARC) as conventional implicatures, then the content of an ARC is by definition *not* at issue. Finally, the status of the adjective as a noun modifier depends on the (in)definiteness of the noun phrase: if the noun phrase is definite, it triggers an existential presupposition: the modifying adjective, as part of the presupposition, is therefore non-at-issue content. From an information-structural point of view, adjectives whose content is part of a presupposition will also be considered as given, while in a predicative position they will, in most contexts, convey new information (focus),¹.

K&W studied how these differences affect the subjectivity of evaluative adjectives such as *amazing* or *good* in English. By means of four experiments, they showed that such adjectives in the three positions were perceived as expressing significantly different degrees of subjectivity: a noun-modifying adjective in a subject definite noun phrase (*The amazing orchestra played...*) was perceived as less subjective than a predicative adjective, and a predicative adjective within an ARC as less subjective than one in a matrix clause. In other words, both being part of the at-issue content and expressing new information makes the interpretation of the adjective more subjective.

If we now look at how the same research question can be addressed for French, we see that the picture is slightly different. Unlike English, which almost exclusively allows for a prenominal position, French allows for certain classes of adjectives to alternate between a prenominal and a postnominal position (*cet incroyable orchestre / cet orchestre incroyable* 'this amazing orchestra') without any apparent change in meaning (Riegel et al., 1994). This option is available for *multidimensional* evaluative adjectives (such as 'amazing', 'boring', 'interesting', 'unfair'), namely adjectives which convey evaluative information that is based on multiple criteria (see McNally & Stojanovic (2017) and references quoted therein).

Several factors influence the choice of the position, among which the type of determiner and the length of the adjective, in itself and with respect to the modifying noun (Thuilier, 2013). There is also much discussion in the literature on the possible semantic/pragmatic effects of the two positions. Different and sometimes contradictory statements are made in this respect. In Riegel et al. (1994)'s descriptive grammar, it is claimed that with adjectives such as *merveilleux* 'wonderful' or *horrible* 'horrible', the prenominal position favors an interpretation where it is the

¹An exception is when the subject is focused (focus fronting).

speaker who is responsible for the attribution of the quality denoted by the adjective, while in the postnominal position such a subjective interpretation disappears (see also Jones (1996)). According to other scholars, a prenominal adjective conveys information that is taken for granted or is shared common knowledge (cf. Martin (2013) and quoted references). On the contrary, a postnominal adjective can be narrowly focused or contrasted (Nølke, 1996; Martin, 2013). If the latter observations are correct, then postnominal adjectives should be judged as behaving more similarly to ARCs, which are assumed to convey new information.

Before taking the two syntactic positions of the noun-modifying adjective into account and their potential effects on subjectivity, we wanted to see whether the results on French were comparable to those on English. To do so, we conducted an experiment that was as close as possible to the original one. That was the purpose of Experiment 1, which therefore only included noun-modifiers in a prenominal position.

2 Experiment 1

Experiment 1 is meant to replicate the first of K&W's experiments, namely the one testing *multidimensional* evaluative adjectives. With such adjectives, results were stronger in K&W's study than with unidimensional ones. As we said above, for a more pertinent comparison with the English study, the noun-modifier occupied a prenominal position. The choice was also determined by the idea that the difference between the prenominal adjective and the ARC would be greater, given the obligatorily postnominal position of the relative clause in French.

Half of the adjectives that we used expressed a positive evaluation, and half of them a negative evaluation. Following K&W, sentences contained objective information that justified the evaluation expressed by the adjective. French adjectives only partly overlapped the ones used for the English experiment. We wanted to control for certain factors that have an effect on the acceptability of a prenominal position, such as the frequency and the length of the adjective, as well as the choice of the determiner in the noun phrase (Thuillier, 2013). We chose adjectives that had a comparable frequency of use across items; we excluded monosyllabic adjectives (and nouns) and there was at most a one-syllable difference between the adjective and its noun. A demonstrative determiner (*ce/cette* 'this') was used for all items, which made the prenominal adjective more natural and sound less formal. Finally, because of the effect that tense might have on subjectivity, all verbs had imperfect tense in both the matrix clause and the ARC.

Table 1 illustrates an item in all conditions for Experiment 1, as well as for Experiments 2 and 3 (see Sections 3 and 4).

Table 1: An experimental item in all its conditions across experiments

Baseline (Exp 1/2)	Cet orchestre comprenait cinq violonistes avec l'oreille absolue. <i>This orchestra included five violinists with perfect pitch.</i>
Noun Modifier (Exp 1/3-prenom.)	Cet incroyable orchestre comprenait cinq violonistes avec l'oreille absolue. <i>This amazing orchestra included five violinists with perfect pitch.</i>
Noun Modifier (Exp 2/3-postnom.)	Cet orchestre incroyable comprenait cinq violonistes avec l'oreille absolue. <i>This orchestra amazing included five violinists with perfect pitch.</i>
Predicate (Exp 1/2)	Cet orchestre était incroyable , il comprenait cinq violonistes avec l'oreille absolue. <i>This orchestra was amazing, it included five violinists with perfect pitch.</i>
Relative clause (Exp 1/2)	Cet orchestre, qui était incroyable , comprenait cinq violonistes avec l'oreille absolue. <i>This orchestra, which was amazing, included five violinists with perfect pitch.</i>

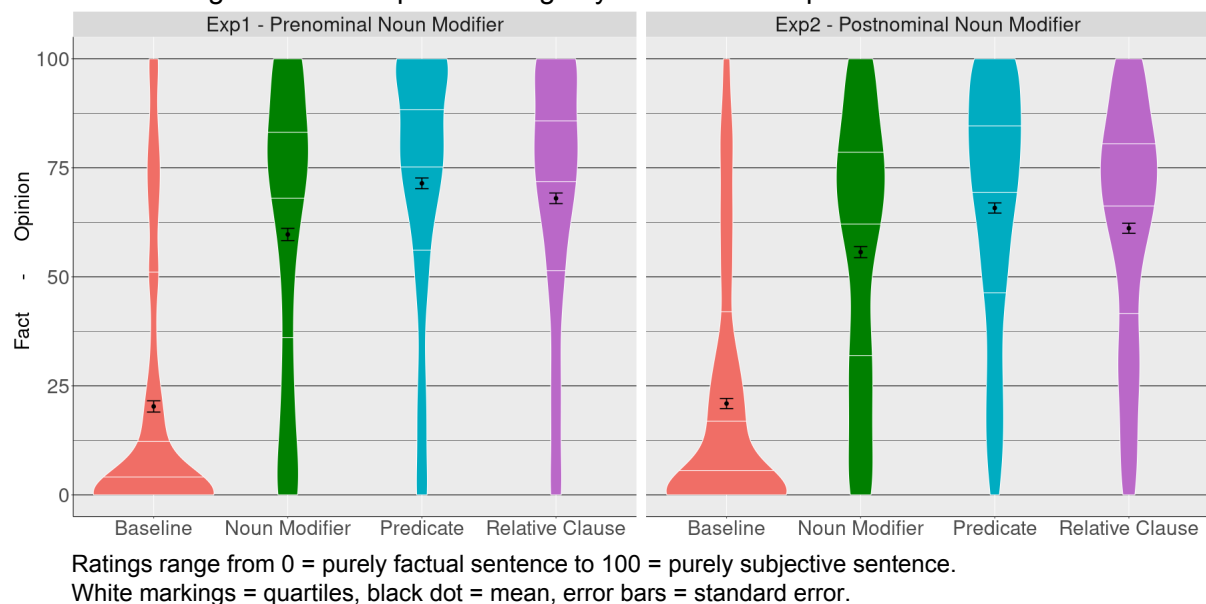
Boldface indicates the adjective.

The materials, design, and procedure were analogous to those used by K&W. On a computer, participants had to indicate on a scale whether written sentences contained an opinion or a fact. Participants were told that such sentences had been extracted from newspapers, magazines, blogs, etc. K&W used a 6-point numerical fact/opinion scale, but we presented participants with a 100-point scale that appeared as a slider with virtually no transition from one point to the next. A near-continuous scale has two benefits: it allows participants to better nuance their judgments, and it better qualifies for an analysis of the data with linear mixed mod-

els (dependent variable = number ranging from 0 to 100). Our study had 24 target items and 43 fillers, presented in a latin square design with randomization so that participants saw 6 target items in each of the four conditions (Baseline, Noun Modifier, Predicate and Relative Clause). The experiment was preceded by three trials. 96 French native speakers were recruited via Prolific (www.prolific.co) and received a compensation to answer the questionnaire, which was run via an instance of IbexFarm (Drummond, 2016) hosted on university servers.

Results showed a similar pattern to the one found for English adjectives: all three conditions differed significantly from the baseline, which was taken as the reference level in a linear mixed model, with items and participants as random effects (see below Figure 1, left, $p < .001$ for all 3 target conditions). A pairwise comparison with Bonferroni correction showed that the least subjective interpretation is the one where the adjective modifies the noun, like in K&W's study. Adjectives in a predicate position and inside an ARC were interpreted as significantly more subjective than adjectives modifying the noun ($p < .001$), but subjectivity ratings in the predicate and the relative-clause conditions were less distinguishable. While predicates received the highest mean rating overall, the difference between the two, unlike K&W's results, was not statistically significant.

Figure 1: Fact/Opinion ratings by condition in Experiments 1 and 2



3 Experiment 2

As discussed in the Introduction, the position of the noun-modifying adjective in French is assumed to have an effect on subjectivity. In order to test this, we replicated the first experiment by replacing prenominal adjectives with postnominal ones. If the intuition of part of the literature that a prenominal position increases subjectivity is correct, then a *postnominal* adjective would be judged as even less subjective in this experiment; on the contrary, within the hypothesis that a postnominal adjective is focused, we would expect it to be interpreted more similarly as an adjective in an ARC. The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1 and 98 other native speakers of French, recruited via Prolific again, took part.

Results showed the same overall pattern as those in Experiment 1: noun-modifying adjectives were rated as significantly less subjective than those inside an ARC and the latter as less subjective than predicative ones (Figure 1, right). However, this time the difference between ARC and predicate position was significant, even after Bonferroni correction ($p < .05$). The absolute numerical difference between the baseline and the noun-modifier condition was slightly smaller than in Experiment 1 (20.3 vs 59.7 in Experiment 1, 20.9 vs 55.7 in Experiment 2), but participants globally rated the three subjective conditions as less subjective in Experiment 2.

A linear mixed model was also run including the data from both experiments and an *Experiment* predictor (mean-center coded) in interaction with the adjective conditions. The model did not single out the noun-modifier condition from the ARC and the predicate conditions across experiments, thus ruling out a simple effect of the postnominal position of the adjective.

4 Experiment 3

The results of Experiment 2 did not confirm what was predicted in the literature concerning an effect of the position of the noun-modifying adjective. In order to verify these results, a third experiment was conducted, consisting of noun-modifying adjectives in a prenominal vs postnominal position only. The same 24 target items were presented to 53 French native speakers recruited from the RISC network (CNRS, UMR 3352), as well as 48 fillers, with no baseline condition this time. The same procedure and the same 100-point slider scale were used. Results were in line with previous experiments, and no significant difference was found in subjectivity judgments between the two positions.

5 Discussion and conclusions

Given the important difference between the three conditions and the baseline (which was constructed as conveying factual information), one may wonder whether the presence of the adjective does not have a pragmatic "subjectivizing" effect on the whole utterance, despite the fact that, strictly semantically, only the adjective is subjective.² Future experiments may test this hypothesis by giving more explicit instructions to participants in this respect.

Concerning the difference among the three conditions, in French, like in English, both pragmatic dimensions play a role in the interpretation of the sentence as conveying subjective information. Results in both languages, however, point out the major role played by the given-new distinction: adjectives conveying new information (ARCs and predicates) are evaluated as distinctly more subjective than those that are part of given information. From a syntactic point of view, the difference is not between being inside a noun phrase (the noun-modifier and the ARC, which also depends on the noun) or not; rather, it is between adjectives followed by a copula, therefore in a predicative position (in a matrix clause or in an ARC) and adjectives that directly modify the noun. In order to disentangle the predicative position from new information, future research might test adjectives within an *indefinite* noun phrase occupying a position inside the verb phrase (e.g. 'The concert was played by an amazing orchestra'), which is a typical position for new information (both in English and in French), though the adjective is not predicative.

Concerning the specificity of the French data, if it is indeed the given/new distinction that plays a role, one would expect a more subjective interpretation of postnominal adjectives, within the claim that they are in focus. Our results could not support this nor a more general hypothesis of an effect on subjectivity of the pre-/postnominal position. Our results could also not support the hypothesis of a difference between English and French due to the additional position available in French. A larger cross-linguistic analysis, targeting languages that have a yet different inventory of syntactic positions, might shed more light in this respect.

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²We thank a reviewer for pointing out to us such intriguing possibility.