

## Modifiers in early Germanic: a comparative corpus study

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The early Germanic languages are generally reported to have canonical modifier-noun ordering, with postnominal modifiers being associated with emphasis or occurring for stylistic reasons (see for example for Old English (OE) Mitchell (1985 I:78) and Fischer et al. (2000:46) and for Old High German (OHG) Schrodtt (2004:37)). However, for Old Norse (ON), noun-modifier is reported to be the neutral order (see for instance Valfell & Cathey (1981:28) and Faarlund (2004:67-8)). If true, this difference in word order would be remarkable given the common ancestry of the languages and the similarities of their modern varieties.

In this paper, we report on a comparative corpus study of early Germanic noun phrases, with a particular focus on modifier-noun ordering. We consider OE, OHG, ON, Old Saxon (OS) and Gothic (G). Our data show that for all languages except Gothic, prenominal position is overwhelmingly more common, with the proportion of prenominal unmodified adjectives ranging from 81% in OS to 91% in ON and 97% in OE. In the Gothic texts, the distribution is roughly equal between pre- and post-nominal modification, though it is not clear what conclusions can be drawn given the close similarity to the Greek original (though see Ratkus 2011). For OHG there is substantial variation between text types; the relatively free translations have over 90% prenominal adjectives, whereas interlinear translations and poetic texts have a lower percentage.

Though our study shows a general preference for canonical modifier-noun ordering across the languages, it also reveals interesting differences between text types, between different types of modifiers and between the languages. Some individual lexical items show a different distribution across the languages; there is for instance a tendency for cognates of *almighty* and *self* to occur postnominally more often than adjectives in general. There are also striking language-specific lexical differences; *mikil* 'much'/'great' is postnominal in 85% of its occurrences in OS, whereas in OHG, ON and OE its distribution is in line with that of adjectives in general.

With regard to adjectives, we note that weight plays a role, with modified adjectives more likely than unmodified adjectives to follow the noun. This is clearest in ON, but even here premodification is preferred, with 66% of adjective phrases being prenominal, and this even includes adjectives with complements. Our data also show that recursively occurring adjectives are relatively rare, all languages have adjectives flanking the noun, and adjectives are frequently co-ordinated. ON is the most striking example, with fewer than 10 instances of two adjectives without coordination and no example of more than two.

For non-adjectival modifiers, it seems that, in general, elements such as quantifiers and numerals pattern with adjectives in their distribution, but modifying participles are more frequently postnominal, particularly clearly so in OHG and OS. Possessive pronouns share inflectional properties with adjectives in all languages and are frequently referred to as 'possessive adjectives' (e.g. Campbell (1959) for OE, Heltoft (2010:20) for ON). With respect to order, in OE, they pattern with adjectives and are prenominal in 99.7% of instances. ON, on the other hand shows a remarkably different pattern, with only 30% of possessive pronouns being prenominal, making it questionable whether they should be considered part of the same category as adjectives. With reference to OHG, Demske (2001:139–41) argues that it is problematic for formal reasons to class possessive pronouns as adjectives; third person non-reflexive possessors are not inflected adjectivally, instead the genitive form of the personal pronouns is used. We show that the genitive pronoun forms also pattern differently with respect to order; in OS, these non-reflexive third person possessors are exclusively prenominal, whereas the other possessive pronouns occur postnominally in 15% of the cases.

## Corpora

Language	Corpus	Comments
Gothic	PROIEL Gothic Bible	Also manual search using Snædal (1998)
Old High German	Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch	
Old Saxon	HeliPaD	
Old English	YCOE	
Old Norse	IcePaHC	All texts dated 1150-1350, total of 248,914 words

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