

# THE CROSS-LINGUISTIC DISTRIBUTION OF ADJECTIVE ORDERING RESTRICTIONS\*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English displays well-known restrictions on the ordering of multiple prenominal adjectival modifiers (see Bloomfield, 1933; Whorf, 1945; Lance, 1968; Vendler, 1968; Quirk et al., 1972 among numerous others). Most descriptions include a hierarchy such as the following: QUALITY > SIZE > SHAPE > COLOR > PROVENANCE.<sup>1</sup> (1) shows that the preferred orderings are in line with this hierarchy:

- (1) a. SIZE > COLOR > PROVENANCE: small green Chinese vase (\*green small Chinese vase, \*green Chinese small vase, ??small Chinese green vase . . .)
- b. QUALITY > SHAPE: nice round plate (\*round nice plate)
- c. SIZE > SHAPE: small square table (\*square small table)

While it has been noted that such hierarchies are not absolutely rigid, speakers of English have a strong intuition that the above orders are basic.<sup>2</sup>

If we turn now to another language, Mandarin, we might be led to the conclusion that there is no evidence for such restrictions in that language. In the following examples, all of the indicated orderings are fine:

- (2) a. SIZE, COLOR:  
xiaǒ-de lǜ-de huāpíng  
*small-DE green-DE vase*  
small green vase  
lǜ-de xiǎo-de huāpíng  
*small green vase*
- b. QUALITY, SHAPE:  
hǎo-de yuán-de pánzi  
*good-DE round-DE plate*  
nice round plate  
yuán-de hǎo-de pánzi  
*nice round plate*

- (2) c. SIZE, SHAPE:  
 xiǎo-de fāng-de zhuōzi  
*small-DE square-DE table*  
 small square table  
  
 fāng-de xiǎo-de zhuōzi  
*small square table*

Notice that each of the adjectives in (2) is marked with the particle **de**, which we shall consistently gloss as *DE*. This particle is also used to mark relative clauses and possessives (see J. Huang, 1982; Kitagawa and Ross, 1982; C. Huang, 1987):

- (3) a. wǒ mǎi-de huāpíng  
*I buy-DE vase*  
 the vase that I bought  
  
 b. wǒ-de huāpíng  
*I-DE vase*  
 my vase

Now, it is also possible to use monosyllabic adjectives in Mandarin to modify noun phrases without the use of **de** (Li and Thompson, 1981, pp. 117–8), and in such cases ordering restrictions such as those found in English reappear.<sup>3</sup> We note here that such modification is limited to at most two **de**-less adjectives; we will provide an explanation for this restriction in a later section. So, in (4) we see that SIZE > COLOR, QUALITY > SHAPE, and SIZE > SHAPE restrictions do hold in Mandarin, as in English:

- (4) a. SIZE > SHAPE:  
 xiǎo lǜ huāpíng  
*small green vase*  
 small green vase  
  
 \*lǜ xiǎo huāpíng  
  
 b. QUALITY > SHAPE:  
 hǎo yuán pánzi  
*good round plate*  
 nice round plate  
  
 \*yuán hǎo pánzi