

Attribution in German and Arabic: the adjective

In German, the syntactic position of adjectives determines whether they are inflected or not. When used attributively, they are in pre-head position in the nominal phrase and are inflected. The head of the nominal phrase and the attributive adjective agree with each other in gender, number and case. When used predicatively, they are separated from the noun they refer to, do not express those categories and are not inflected.

In Arabic, adjectives are inflected when used attributively and predicatively due to the existence of nominal sentences in the language. Therefore, the status of an adjective does not correspond to its position: they are inflected regardless of their syntactic position. A typological characteristic of Arabic is the postposition of the attributive adjective. The fact that the attributive adjective appears after the head of the nominal phrase is due to the Arabic morpheme of definiteness (*al-*) being attached proclitically to the head, thus forming a phonomorphological unit with the noun. To indicate that an adjective is being used attributively, the morpheme of definiteness is also attached to it. In its predicative function, the adjective is nunated (*-n*). Nunation precludes the use of a morpheme of definiteness. In an extended nominal phrase with an adjective, then, this morpheme is a marker of the attributiveness and not a means of determination.

The differing positions of attributive adjectives in a linguistic comparison of German and Arabic have functional implications. The pre-head position of the adjective in German triggers a *progressive* processing of knowledge; the adjective restricts the subject area prospectively. The post-head position of the adjective in Arabic, in contrast, triggers a *regressive* processing of knowledge; the adjective specifies the subject area in retrospect. In this way, hearers are referred back to the head of the nominal phrase before the complete utterance is processed. This retrospection is facilitated with the help of the morpheme of definiteness which prefixes the adjective.