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Contrasting English noun-phrase complexity with German and Swedish

from *marshmallow experiments* to *Highclere gardeners*

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The noun phrase (NP) is one of the prime sites where languages show different preferences. A key issue is that while some languages like English and German typically place a lot of information before the NP head, others, such as Swedish, seem to prefer the postposition (e.g., Ström Herold/Levin 2019). This study targets English noun premodifiers, also referred to as noun sequences (e.g., Biber/Grieve/Iberri-Shea 2009; Biber/Gray 2016; Smitterberg 2021). Two examples are given in (1) and (2) with their German and Swedish translations:

(1)

a	*BBC*	*photographer*		(LEGS; En. original)
ein-en	*BBC-Fotograf-en*			(Ge. translation)
a-M.ACC	BBC-photographer-M.ACC			

‘a BBC photographer’

en	*fotograf*	*från*	*BBC*	(Sw. translation)
a-N-N	photographer from		BBC	

‘a photographer from the BBC’

(2)

bumblebee habits				(LEGS; En. original)
die	*Verhaltensweisen*	*von*	*Hummeln*	(Ge. translation)
the-DEF.ART.PL	habits-PL	of	*bumblebees*-DAT.PL	

‘the habits of bumblebees’

humlors	levnadsvanor	(Sw. translation)
bumblebees-GEN.INDEF.PL	habits-PL	

‘bumblebees’ habits’

As illustrated above, noun sequences may contain proper (*BBC*) or common nouns (*bumblebee*), and the translations showcase different correspondence types, ranging from compounds to prepositional phrases (PPs) and genitives. Although there is an abundance of monolingual research on English noun sequences, contrastive studies are largely lacking (recent exceptions being Berg 2017, Ström Herold/Levin 2019 and Kosmata/ Schlücker 2022). In our study we explore English noun sequences through the lens of German and Swedish correspondences, addressing the following research questions:

- What are the German and Swedish correspondences of English noun sequences, and how are these distributed?

- How do the categorial status of the modifiers (common or proper noun) and the semantic relationship between modifiers and heads affect the distributions of correspondences?

1

- What do the German and Swedish correspondences tell us about language-specific preferences, and/or translation-related effects, such as explicitation and implicitation (Baker 1993)?

Our data originate from the five-million-word bidirectional *Linnaeus University English-German-Swedish* corpus (LEGS). The corpus consists of contemporary non-fiction texts, such as popular science and history. The condensed and information-focused nature of these texts make them optimal for our study. We extracted noun sequences in English originals and translations from tagged text files (3,000 tokens in all), and classified them according to formal and functional features. Contrary to our initial expectations, 3+-part sequences are rare (10%), and thus we focus mainly on 2-part sequences.

Our study shows that the most common correspondence type – regardless of language and translation direction – is the compound noun (cf. Berg 2017). No significant difference is attested between German and Swedish translations in this respect. A significant difference nevertheless emerges in the strong Swedish preference for postmodification. We found that the categorial status of the premodifier is a relevant factor for the correspondence type, common noun premodifiers favouring compounds. Proper noun premodifiers instead favour genitive phrases and PP postmodifiers. As for semantics, the most prevalent relationships between heads and modifiers in the English originals are KIND and PURPOSE, the latter being particularly associated with compounding in translations (*war elephants > Kriegselefanten* (Ge.) / *stridselefanter* (Sw.)). However, a wide range of correspondence types appears in our data. Among these, we find cases of omission of the premodifier (*drug connoisseurs > Connaisseure* (Ge.)). Such examples can be seen as instances of implicitation (Baker 1993). Explicitation (ibid.), on the other hand, is exemplified in the addition of a specifying premodifier (*juice* (Sw.) > *fruit juice*).

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