Introducing Modifiers in the Noun Phrase

Noun phrases (DPs), such as this photo, can be modified both by adjectival modifiers (e.g. old), and by arguments (e.g. of the Queen), usually occurring as PPs. Most literature on the syntax of DPs has assumed that adjectives are base-generated (i.e. Merged) higher than nominal arguments (cf. Alexiadou, Haegeman & Stavrou 2007, and references cited therein). This assumption has recently been challenged by Adger (2013), based on the observation that, cross-linguistically, adjectives occur closer to the head noun than argument PPs (his “PP Peripherality Generalisation”). The relative position of the Merge sites of adjectives and arguments in the DP has become a disputed topic (e.g. Neeleman & Belk’s (2015) counterproposal).

This study offers a novel contribution to this debate by discussing evidence from the syntax of the Italian DP. I will provide five arguments that adjectival modifiers are base-generated lower than arguments. Crucially, I will concentrate on adjectival (1) and argumental (2) modifiers realised as PPs with the preposition di ‘of’, so that my conclusions will be be entirely dependent on the syntactico-semantic nature of such modifiers, as opposed to their surface categorical realisation, which is quite variable both cross- and intra-linguistically.

(1) una statua di marmo di colore rosso ‘a red marble statue’
(2) una statua di Napoleone di Canova ‘a statue of Napoleon by Canova’

First, I will show that the neutral word order displayed by DPs with multiple adjectival and argumental modifiers, schematically represented in (3), cannot be derived unless the adjectival modifiers are base-generated lower.

(3) [DP Noun^0 PP_{ADJ(1)} PP_{ADJ(2)} PP_{ARG(1)} PP_{ARG(2)} ]
where XP_1 is hierarchically lower than XP_2 (cf. Cinque 2010 and Longobardi & Silvestri 2013 for adjectival and argumental hierarchies, respectively)

Secondly, I will look at the properties of some scope-taking modifiers, such as presunta ‘alleged’ in (4). The possible scopes allowed indicate that adjectival modifiers can form a constituent with the noun they modify to the exclusion of arguments, while, crucially, the opposite is impossible.

(4) un presunta statua di marmo di Napoleone
an alleged statue of marble of Napoleon
‘an alleged marble statue of Napoleon’
(i) alleged > statue, of marble, of Napoleon
(ii) of Napoleon > alleged > statue, of marble
(iii) *of marble > alleged > statue, of Napoleon

My third and fourth arguments for the same conclusion will come from the patterns of nominal ellipsis, and from demonstrative reinforcer structures, respectively. Finally, my last piece of evidence will come from “truncated” structures, where the noun phrase does not seem to project a full DP. I will show that argumental modifiers, unlike adjectival ones, are generally excluded in these cases, and only become acceptable if the noun phrase projects further structure. This is evidence that arguments, unlike adjectives, can only be introduced relatively high in the DP.

The proposal that adjectives are base-generated lower than arguments has important implications concerning the semantics of noun phrases, and suggests an approach to the division of semantic labour in DPs according to which the lower (NP) layer denotes kinds or properties, as opposed to predicates (cf. Zamparelli 2000, Kratzer 2008, and McNally 2017, a.o.).