

When and Why Prenominal Modifiers are Permissible in SVO Languages: Evidence from *empunya* Constructions in Malay

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Typological studies have revealed a strong association between prenominal modification and SOV word order, and postnominal modification with SVO word order, with Chinese dialects among the very few cases where prenominal modification is observed among SVO languages (Greenberg 1978; Dryer 1992). As proposed in his Early Immediate Constituent processing model, Hawkins (1990, 1994) argues that the 'heavier' (or longer) the premodifying phrase, the greater the intervening distance between the main verb and the head noun in the object complement, and hence the higher (and less tolerable) the processing cost. Empirical support for Hawkins' predictions has been reported in Matthews and Yeung (2001) using reaction time studies on native speaker's processing of Cantonese prenominal relative clauses. The present study provides additional support from Malay prenominal modifying constructions in the form of *empunya*-type possessive and pronominal constructions.

Tokens for analysis come from classical texts from the 17th to 20th century made electronically accessible via the Malay Concordance Project (courtesy of Dr. Ian Proudfoot and his research team at the Australian National University). Results of our analysis reveal that most of the prenominal *empunya* constructions involve 'light' possessor NPs or 'light' pronominal DPs, i.e. constituents of one to three words in length. In fact, heavy (or more wordy) possessor NPs or pronominal DPs are almost non-existent.

In this paper, I will provide quantitative findings as well as naturalistic tokens to explain when and why prenominal modification is permissible in Malay, despite strong pressure in most circumstances to rely on postmodifiers. I also argue that the constraints and facilitations observed with respect to prenominal *empunya* constructions are consistent with Hawkins' predictions, and like the findings in Matthews and Yeung (1991), are generalizable to other SVO languages with prenominal modifiers.

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