

Order of Cumulative Adjectives

(adapted from *The Grammar Book* by Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, pp. 392-394)

1. Adjectives used attributively (i.e. used *before* nouns) can be either cumulative or coordinate. Unlike coordinate adjectives, cumulative adjectives are from different semantic categories, have to be used in certain order, and cannot be joined by *and* or be separated by commas—for example, *I have a **small old blue Japanese** car*. Although more than three adjectives rarely occur in speech or writing, as many as seven cumulative adjectives can come before a noun:

| det. | opinion | size | shape | condition | age | color | origin | noun |
|-----------|----------------|-------------|--------------|------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| <i>an</i> | <i>ugly</i> | <i>big</i> | <i>round</i> | <i>chipped</i> | <i>old</i> | <i>blue</i> | <i>French</i> | <i>table</i> |

2. However, not every native speaker agrees with the above order. The table below shows the correlations between the above predicted order and the order given by 30 native speakers of English:

| opinion | size | shape | condition | age | color | origin | noun |
|----------------|-------------|--------------|------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|------|
| .80 | .96 | .66 | .79 | .85 | .77 | 1.0 | |

These results indicate that while the established order is valid, it is not equally fixed for all types of adjectives.

3. As we saw in the example from the cartoon in the *Newsweek* magazine, coordinate adjectives are from the same semantic category—thus, their order is not fixed—and are usually separated by the comma, although using *and* instead of the comma is also possible, e.g. *Clinton was a charming, attractive (or an attractive, charming) President*.
4. Some coordinate adjectives, however, have to be conjoined with *and*, as in *an orange and white marble* and *a black and white TV*. With these adjectives, using only one of them would be semantically misleading.

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