

# Modification at the interfaces: An introduction

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Received 8 July 2014; accepted 10 July 2014

Available online 28 August 2014

## Abstract

While we can name examples of modifiers (e.g. adjectives, adverbs, PPs, relative clauses), it is not uncontroversial to what extent “modifier” is a syntactic term and how we should represent modification as part of a semantic model. This being true, modification is not only interesting because it challenges a simple composition system that proceeds through application of functions to arguments. In this introduction we present four papers that show that research on modification proves to be relevant for current investigations on the syntax–semantics interface as well as the language–cognition interface.

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**Keywords:** Composition; Intersection; Adjectives; Adverbials; Syntax–semantics interface; Language–cognition interface

## 1. Foreword

This paper is intended as a companion to this Special Issue [SI] on “Modification at the Interfaces”, which consists of the following four papers: “Saturating Syntax: Linkers and Modification in Tagalog” by Gregory Scontras and Andreea Nicolae; “Restrictive vs. non-restrictive modification and evaluative predicates” by Fabienne Martin, “Interpretation as Optimization: Constitutive Material Adjectives” by Michael Oliver, and “Similarity demonstratives” by Carla Umbach and Helmar Gust.

In this introduction, we identify the theoretical problems that the research on modification has raised (section 2) and, in doing so, we contextualize the aforementioned papers as each contributing to or exemplifying these debates; in particular, we focus on the syntax of modifiers (section 2.1), the modes of composition (section 2.2), intersection (section 2.3), and restrictive vs. non-restrictive modification (section 2.4). Moreover, we discuss how the papers relate to each other thematically and what their spot is in a SI that focuses on how modification has a say in the research on the language interfaces (syntax–semantics as well as language–cognition) (section 3). This introduction also comments on potential connections with other topics that are currently being discussed in works on modification (section 4).

We thus hope that the reader will find in this introduction the answer as to why modification is a topic worth studying and why the following papers make a real theoretical contribution as well as raise new challenging and relevant questions.

## 2. What is modification?

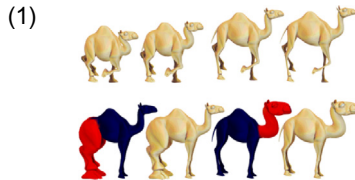
Unlike technical words such as *argument*, *head*, *function*, *projection* or *complement*, even linguists use *modification* or *modifier* in a loose, intuitive way. This is because, on the one hand, in every-day talk, to modify amounts to change, and

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change is a rather broad term. On the other hand, as will become clear shortly, there is no technical definition that identifies the syntactic or semantic behavior of modifiers and which covers the varied set of expressions that could be called *modifiers*.

To modify something means to *alter* the values of some of its parameters but not enough as to change what it is. It also means to *add* something to the modifiee that is not necessary for it to be what it is. Googling for *modifier* pictures, we obtain, for instance, (1).



In the series of (pictures of) camels shown in (1), two of them have been modified (with a picture enhancer software) so now they look slightly different; they still are camels, but have different properties, namely their color has changed.

This core meaning is recast in linguistic talk to refer to those categories that fall out of the Aristotelian dichotomy between categories that are subjects of a predication, and categories that are the predicate of a proposition. These include adjectives, adverbials, prepositional phrases and relative clauses, as illustrated in (2). (2-a) is an instance of adjectival modification; then there is a series of adverbs modifying different categories: a verb ((2-b)), an adjective ((2-c)) or an entire sentence ((2-d), (2-e)); (2-f) exemplifies a PP that modifies a VP, and in (2-g) the adnominal modifier is a relative clause.

- (2)
- a. *blue* sky
  - b. *rapidly* sink
  - c. *extremely* hot
  - d. She will *probably* be late.
  - e. *Frankly*, I don't give a damn.
  - f. Peter had dinner *at midnight*.
  - g. the man *who was drinking a glass of wine*

According to Frege, our ontology includes either saturated or unsaturated expressions. He further claims that composition proceeds through application of functions to their arguments (cf. Frege et al., 1951). Prototypical unsaturated expressions are verbs. In the case of intransitive verbs, they apply to an individual, which is a prototypical saturated expression (along with propositions), as in (3).

- (3) John smokes.

In formal semantics, *John* denotes the actual individual by the name of John, which is of type  $\langle e \rangle$ , and *smokes* refers to the characteristic function of the set of individuals that smoke, i.e. it denotes in  $\langle e, t \rangle$ . Composition proceeds via Functional Application so the function is applied to its argument and the result is a truth value. In syntax, this derivation involves merging a DP and a VP into a CP, modulo some additional operations to ensure that certain principles are satisfied.

By contrast, the relation between an adjective (the modifier) and a noun (its modifiee), or an adverb (the modifier) and a verb (its modifiee) cannot be accounted for in the same terms. Modifiers do not saturate their modifiees; not only this, characteristically, modifiers cannot change the type of their modifiee.

As argued for extensively in Morzycki (to appear), it seems only safe to give a negative definition of what it is to be a modifier (i.e. it is a category that does not fit in the conceptual box that includes arguments and predicates); it is harder to provide a positive formal characterization of modification able to capture the diverse phenomena it covers. McNally (to appear) concludes with the following definition of *modifier*:

- (4) Modifier: an expression which combines with another expression to produce a result with the same semantic type.

Morzycki (to appear) is skeptical about whether we can attribute a stronger notional content to the concept of modification beyond McNally's phrasing in (4). He points out that two aspects have to be taken into consideration when defining what a

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