

Identifying Misplaced Modifiers in English Sentence

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Abstract:

in linguistics, a modifier, as its name implies, is a word or group of words that modifies, clarifies or intensifies a specific part in a sentence and is an optional element in phrase structure or clause structure. Modifiers add more value and meaning to the sentence by offering further details that can make the sentence more interesting and engaging. How do you describe what somebody look like? with modifiers. How do you communicate when, where or how something occurred with modifiers. How do you clarify facts or differentiating between people, events, and objects, with modifiers. Sometimes the placement of modifiers varies, it should precede the intended word/group of words it describes or follows it. It is easy to misplace them in writing. Hence, misplaced modifier is separated from the word it describes, creating confusion and ambiguity. Sometimes it is hard to understand the meaning of the sentence because the placement of these modifiers can completely distort the intended meaning of the whole sentence. Consequently, non-native learners of English misuse the accurate position of modifiers and the sentence becomes illogical. In this paper, we cover the main types of modifiers focusing on misplaced modifiers and how to avoid misplaced modifiers. **Key words:** modifiers, pre modifiers, post modifiers, misplaced modifiers, dangling modifiers, squinting modifiers.

Introduction

Many types of words and phrases can act as modifiers such as adjectives, adverbs, adverbial phrases and prepositional phrases, in addition to these, relative clauses can be used to add more information about a subject or an object in a complex sentence. The main function of these modifiers is to give further information about another word in the same sentence that is the head (noun) or the main verb. Typically, modifiers are located either before whatever it modifies which called premodifiers or modifiers that come afterwards are called postmodifiers. However, when a modifier is not immediately next to or in its usual position, the meaning of the sentence can change and these modifiers are called misplaced modifiers or modifier errors. Further, a modifier may not modify a specific word or group of words, and is often found in introductory phrases that miss the subject. This is called a dangling modifier.

The Concept of Modifier

Many definitions have been built, many thoughts and ideas have been recorded. Dypedahl & Hasselgård (Dypedahl & Hasselgård,2018:65) define the modifier as "an element that depends on the head and modifies the way you are to understand what the head refers to"

His new car, 'his new' modifies the head 'car'

Greenbaum, et al: 2018 define modifiers as "units that are dependent on the main word and can be removed".

For example:

(1)Some **green** apples.

Baker(1989:50) on the other hand, defines 'Modifiers' as group of words or phrases that are used to supply an explanation to the head word which is supposed to be modified.

Types of Modifiers

A modifier can appear anywhere in a sentence and can also come either before or after the headword. Modifiers can be classified according to their placement in the sentence as follows:

Pre-modifier

Premodifier is a word that precedes the head to convey more information or add value to the noun or the verb it modifies. Premodifiers are often written more than spoken. As stated by Douglas Biber et al. "Premodifiers and postmodifiers are distributed in the same way across registers rare in conversation, very common in informational writing" Biber, et al (2006:81) categorized premodifiers into four main groups. "There are four major structural types of premodification in English:

- **adjective:** as Stageberg (1981:251) indicates that adjectives are words that describe a noun. Adjective as a modifier can be classified into "pre-nominal" and "post-nominal modifiers". Pre-nominal adjectives occur before the headword of the sentence, for example:

(2) He needs **some talented** people to run his company

(3) It is **a big** hotel. We all can stay here.

(4) He is **a short** man.

(Liu & Zhan: 2018:1-6) defines adjective modifier as "A word that modifies a noun".

(5) The **small** boy saw George with a **crazy** dog recently. The word 'small' describes/modifies the noun 'boy' and the word 'crazy' modifies the noun 'dog'. Hence, modifiers can be single word modifiers and word group modifiers. Single-word modifiers can come before the noun or after the noun. When the single-word modifiers placed before the noun, they are called 'attributives' because they attribute a quality or characteristic to the noun, for example, the **smart** boy. And when the single word modifiers occur after the noun, they are called 'predictive', for example, your outfit is **elegant**. (Gupta, 2019:75)

Single-word attributives:

Adjectives are attributive when they pre modify nouns, they occur between the determiner and the head of the noun phrase.

(6) The **beautiful** garden.

'Beautiful' modifies the noun 'garden'.

Single-word predictive

Quirk (1973:115) presents another type of modifiers which is predictive adjectives. Adjectives are predictive when they modify the noun and is normally occurs after the headword of the sentence. For example:

(7) The movie is **nice**.

'Nice' modifies the noun 'movie'.

(8) The **tall young** man **in the yellow jacket** is my cousin.

The noun 'man' is modified by two pre-noun adjectives, the 'tall young' and the post-noun adjectival prepositional phrase, 'in the yellow jacket'. Together they all make up the noun phrase 'the tall young man in the yellow jacket'.

- **noun:** the combination of a premodifier and the noun it modifies is called a noun phrase. They specify particular aspects or features of the noun, such as type, material, etc. In this case noun is known as an attributive noun or noun adjunct. A noun phrase can be formed in three different ways:

(9) Meet me at the **railway** station.

(10) The **passenger** ship dropped anchor in the harbor.

(11) Fasten your **seat belt** please! Biber, et al (2006:82)

- **Participles:** they have the same function as adjectives and are derived from verbs. It is a form of a verb that is used in a sentence to modify a noun, noun phrase, verb, or verb phrase, and thus plays a role similar to that of an adjective or adverb. Sometimes, "-ed participle" occurs at the beginning of the sentence, and is usually attached to the subject of the main clause. There are two forms:

A: -ed **participial:** restricted area, improved growth, fixed volume, established tradition

B: -ing **participial:** a shocking idea, flashing lights, a growing problem

Examples:

(12) His father is **a retired English teacher**. (past participle=retired)

(13) It is **an exciting match** to watch. (present participle = exciting)

(14) They need **a written apology**. (past participle = written)

(15) Mary got me **a leather bag**. (noun that is working as an adjective) (ibid:83)

Further, premodifiers can come in other forms as:

- A. Determiners
B. Numbers
C. Adverbs

A. Determiners: are words that indicate quantity or number of a noun. Determiners include the following types:

- **Articles:** a, an, the
- **Possessive adjectives:** my, your, his, her, their, our, its
- **Demonstrative adjectives:** this, that, these, those
- **Distributive adjectives:** each, Every, either, neither, any, both, etc.
- **Quantifiers:** Some, many, a few, the few, a lot of, several, etc.

Premodifier	Meaning	Examples
Articles	a, an = refers to an unspecified singular countable noun the = refers to a specified singular countable noun	(16) This is a computer. (17) I don't have an umbrella. (18) The event was well-organized.
Possessive adjectives	refers to the possession of a noun	(19) My sister's name is Russel (20) I love your story (21) John has got a cat in his room
Demonstrative adjectives	refers to a noun or pronoun by expressing its position.	(22) This child looks terrified (23) That lady is pregnant (24) These flowers smell nice
Distributive adjectives	Used to distribute a particular group as an individual and is used with a singular pronoun	(25) Each student was asked to do his/her homework (26) Every house on the street has a garden.
Quantifiers	Word used to express an amount or a degree of something/person.	(27) We ate some bread and potato (28) Do you have any children? (29) I don't have much time.

B- Numbers include both cardinal and ordinal numbers. They also give information about a noun; they talk about the exact quantity (number) of the noun they modify.

one, two, three first, second, third...

Several of these modifiers may be used together in a noun phrase, creating a heavily pre-modified noun phrase, for example:

(30) **The first two equestrian Olympic gold** medals have been won by Iraqi champions.

(31) Look at **those two huge trees** in the park.

(32) We can't eat **these many dark chocolates**. (Greenbaum, et al,2002:49)

C_Adverb modifier

An adverb modifier is a word or phrase that is used to modify another part of a sentence typically an adverb or adjective. When used properly, these modifiers provide additional information about an action or some part of a sentence and answer a question about it. In the sentence 'He crossed the bridge quickly', the word 'quickly' is an adverbial modifier. (Bussmann,1998:22)

Types of Adverbs

According to Gupta, there are seven types of adverbs: adverbs of manner, adverbs of place, and adverbs of time, focusing (or limiting), intensifying, sentence adverb, and connectors.

1- **Adverb of manner:** provides more information on how a verb is carried out. It is usually located before the verb.

(33) The child runs **quickly**.

(34) The police searched the room **carefully**.

2- **Adverb of place:** refers to the location of an action or where the action occurred/will occur, for example (here, there, far, near, somewhere, outside, inside...etc)

(35) The post office is **between** the cinema and the cafe.

(36) I found my key **under** the chair.

3- **Adverb of time:** are words that describe how long a certain action will happen, for example (now, tomorrow, early, daily, weekly, recently, etc.)

(37) Tom walks to work **every morning**.

(38) I will call you **now**.

It is possible to put time at the beginning of the sentence.

(39) **Every morning** Tom walks to work.

(40) **On Wednesday** I am going to Erbil.

4- **Focusing (or limiting) adverbs:** point to a particular part of a sentence. It restricts or limit the meaning of the verb. It is frequently placed in the front of the sentence. For example (also, only, never, hardly, just ...etc.),

(41) **Only** my sister helped me to buy the car.

5- **Intensifying adverbs:** can strengthen the meaning of verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Most of these adverbs occupy mid- position, and usually at the end, for example: (completely, badly, really, totally, carefully, highly, deeply...etc.)

(42) She was so sad. I felt **extremely** sorry for her.

6- **Sentence modifiers** (sentence adverbs/disjunct): A sentence modifier is an adverbial that describes the meaning of an entire sentence rather than just a single word/head , for example: (basically, certainly, apparently, hopefully, indeed, thankfully, etc..)

(43) **Fortunately**, we arrived in time. (Gupta, 2019:102)

Stagberg (1981:249) states that sentence modifiers have seven structures:

1. Single-word adverbial

(44) **Luckily**, I know how to drive.

Here, 'luckily' modifies the entire sentence.

2. Clause adverbials

(45) **Since the keys were lost**, we broke the door to get in.

The adverbial clause 'since the keys were lost' modifies the other sentence 'we broke the door to get in'

3. Prepositional phrase

(46) John bought the flowers **for his girlfriend**.

4. **Absolute phrase:** is a noun phrase made up of a noun or pronoun with a participle phrase. A present participle is a verb ending in -ing. A past participle is a verb ending in -ed. It describes the entire sentence, not a single word.

(47) **The weather being nice**, we went out for a picnic.

5. **Infinitive phrase:** is composed of an infinitive verb (to+verb) and is followed by the complements or modifiers. The infinitive phrase can function as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb.

(48) Let's go **to see** the New Marvel film

6. **Participle phrase:** is a phrase headed by a participle verb (past or present) and modifies a noun. It can function as an adjective or an adverb.

(49) Those people **waiting for the tour bus** look excited.

7. **Relative in- ever:** relative words with the suffix 'ever' to give more information about a person, situation, etc..

(50) **whoever** stole my ring should bring it back immediately.

7- Connecters:

Connecters signal a meaningful connection between sentence and units, such as (firstly, secondly, in conclusion, finally, for example, in that case, by the way, etc.)

(51) **Although** he studied hard, he failed. (Gupta, 2019:102)

Post-modifier

Postmodifiers are words that follow the headword they modify. It can come in a variety of forms.

1. **Prepositional phrases:** are phrases starting with prepositions and is followed by the object of the preposition, they can give various information about the time ,place ,genitive, source of a noun, for example:

(52) She writes the essay **in ten minutes**

(53) **The girl in the red dress** is my niece.

Noun	phrase	=	the	girl	in	the	red	dress
Premodifiers				=				the
Noun		=				the		girl
Postmodifier	= in the red dress (prepositional phrase)							(Crystal,1976:88)

2. **Present participle phrases:** starting with a present participle (a verb ending with -ing), occur right after the noun, and modifies it. For example:

(54) I was looking at **the man holding the laptop** .

Noun	phrase	=	the	man	holding	the	laptop
Premodifier		=			the		(article)
Noun		=					man
Postmodifier	= holding the laptop (present participle phrase)						

The present participle phrase (holding the laptop) is coming next to and modifying the noun 'man'. It is working as an adjective.

(55) Do you know any of **these girls waiting in the queue?**

Noun	phrase	=	girls	waiting	in	the	queue
Premodifier		=					these
Noun		=					girls
Postmodifier	= waiting in the queue (present participle phrase)						

The present participle phrase 'waiting in the queue' is sitting next to the noun 'girls' and giving essential information about it. Since it is coming after the noun it's modifying, we are calling it a postmodifier. (Biber, et al, 2002:107))

3. **Past participle phrases:** starting with a past participle and modifies a noun or a pronoun. It occurs next to a noun and describes it.

(56) The old man **diagnosed** with cancer has written a book about his life.

Noun phrase: the old man diagnosed with cancer

Premodifier: the

Noun: man

Postmodifier: diagnosed with cancer

(57) I collected all the flowers **cut** by the children

Noun	phrase	=	the	flowers	cut	by	the	children
Premodifier		=			the			(article)
Noun		=						flowers
Postmodifier	= cut by the children (past participle phrase)(ibid)							

4. **Infinitive phrases:** is a multi-word that starts with an infinitive verb (to+verb) and can function as a noun, adverb, or adjective in a sentence.

(58) She needs a person **to repair** her car

Noun	phrase	=	a	person	to	repair	her	car
Premodifier		=						a
Noun		=						person
Postmodifier	=to repair her car.							

(59) I have a meeting **to attend** with my supervisor.

Noun	phrase	=	a	meeting	to	attend.
Premodifier		=				a
Noun		=				meeting
Postmodifier	=to attend with my supervisor (infinitive)					(Stagberg,1981:250)

5. **Relative/Adjective clause:** is a dependent clause acting like an adjective in the sentence and occurs next to a noun/pronoun. It is also referred to as relative clause.

(60) I am so excited to talk about **the movie that we watched last night**.

Noun phrase = the movie that we watched last night
 Noun = movie
 Premodifier = the
 Postmodifier = that we watched last night (adjective clause)

Here in this example, the adjective clause is occurring next to the noun 'movie' and giving essential information about it. It's informing us which movie the speaker is referring to.

(61) My eldest sister, **who lives in Erbil**, will be coming to Salah al Den next week.

Noun phrase = my eldest sister
 Noun = sister
 Premodifier = eldest
 Postmodifier = who lives in Erbil (adjective clause) (Crystal, 1976:89)

6. Appositive: is a noun that follows another noun phrase and provides additional information or description in order to clarify or classify it.

(62) The capital of UK, **London**, is a popular destination for tourists.

Noun phrase = the capital of UK
 Noun = the capital
 Postmodifier = London

(63) My best friend **Yasmeen Ahmid** is getting married next week.

Noun phrase = my best friend Yasmine Ahmid
 Noun = friend
 Postmodifier = Yasmine Ahmid (ibid)

Misplaced Modifiers

The English language is a language of word order. Word ordering is crucial to form the sentence structure. Unlike many other languages, an incorrectly placement of word or phrase can completely change the meaning of a sentence. In this case, the most commonly misplaced parts of English speech and writing is the modifier. According to this rule, Hopper states that we as human beings write thoughts down or speak them according to the order in which they enter our minds. However, misplaced modifiers take place and distort the meaning of the sentence and the native or non-native speakers cannot precisely figure out what is intended to describe. (Huddleson, 1988:87)

Ideally, modifiers as explained earlier appear next to the word or phrase they describe, either directly before or after it. However, when a modifier is improperly separated or put away from the head word it describes, it becomes confusing which word it is supposed to modify. By definition in grammar, that is a misplaced modifier. For example:

(64) On her way home, she found a **gold** man's watch

Here, it sounds like the man is gold not the watch, the word 'gold' is misplaced modifier.

Lester and Beason point out that misplaced modifiers "do not make sentences ungrammatical. Misplaced modifiers are wrong because they say something the writer did not intend to say" (Lester & Beason 2013:194)

Misplaced modifier is a grammatical mistake/error, sometimes the writers use modifiers incorrectly, the sentence sounds strange and ambiguous, leading to misinterpretations of its meaning. As a result, the reader got confused and cannot comprehend the exact meaning of the sentence.

(65) This table was made by an old carpenter with **carved legs**. (wrong)

It sounds like the writer means the carpenter has carved legs

This table with **carved legs** was made by an old carpenter. (clear)

In general, there are three common types of misplaced modifiers; dangling modifiers, squinting and limiting modifiers. Writers should avoid using misplaced modifiers or restructure the sentence so that they can convey the exact meaning and the reader can get the message.

Adverb as misplaced modifier:

Generally, adverbs modify verbs and adjectives and can move around before or after the headword. In many situations, the placement of adverbs does not affect the intended meaning. However, there are instances where adverb placement can significantly affect the meaning of a sentence. This is particularly true for adverbs that place limits on the words they modify, such as (only, solely, merely, nearly or just)

Correct: We slowly ate the lunch that we had bought

Incorrect: We ate the lunch that we had bought slowly

Here, the first sentence implies that we ate the lunch slowly, but the second suggests that we bought the lunch slowly. By moving the adverb next to the verb it modifies, the meaning will be correct.

Correct: (66) She wants **only** a new laptop for her birthday

Incorrect: She **only** wants a new laptop for her birthday.

In the first sentence, it suggests that the girl wants a new laptop for her birthday, yet she wants other things but not for her birthday, while the second sentence implies that the only things that she wants in her life is a new laptop and does not need anything else. (Hopper and et al, 2000:83)

Adjective as misplaced modifier:

Unlike adverbs, adjectives do not have the ability of adverbs to float around freely in a sentence, adjectives have restricted position, either take the pre-nominal place or they take the post-nominal place. If the adjective is incorrectly moved from its actual place, the meaning of the sentence will be distorted, for example:

Incorrect: (67) I saw a man eat a **hot** plate of French fries at supper

Correct: I saw a man eat a plate of **hot** French fries at supper

Here, in the first sentence, because of the position of the adjective 'hot' the reader understands the plate was hot, but in the 2nd sentence putting the adjective in the correct place besides the noun, so the French fries are hot not the plate.

Prepositional phrase as misplaced modifier

Another common misplaced modifier is prepositional phrases. A prepositional phrase is a noun clause preceded by a preposition, and must clearly indicate the word in the sentence that it modifies (the word is a noun or verb).

When modifying verbs, prepositional phrases must be next to them, so it doesn't seem like they're modifying another word.

Misplaced modifier: (68) John **saw** his friend **on the way to the Church**.

Correct : **On the way to the Church**, John **saw** his friend.

The first sentence implies that John's friend was on his/her way to the Church when John saw them. The second sentence suggests that John was on his way to the Church when he saw his/her friend.

Misplaced modifier: (69) **In the box**, Sarah found the memorandum.

Obviously, Sarah was not inside the box when she found the memorandum. Nonetheless, this sentence should be written as follows:

Correct: Sarah found the memorandum **in the box**. (Gunner, 2021:33)

Dangling Modifier

Dangling modifier is a grammatical error and thus is a type of misplaced modifiers. It is misplaced because there is no headword to modify, the headword is omitted. Dangling modifiers describe a word or phrase that is not existed in the sentence.

Dangling Modifiers Examples:

(70) **Happy that exam was over**, the afternoon was quite relaxing.

The headword is not found in the sentence!

Misplaced modifier: **Happy that exam was over**, the afternoon was quite relaxing for **the students**.

The headword 'the students' is placed far away from the modifier it describes.

Dangling modifier: (71) **After walking around in the park**, the book still seems better.

The modifier is dangling because the headword is omitted from the sentence, the adverbial phrase 'After walking around in the park' incorrectly modifies 'the book'.

Correct: **After walking around in the park**, **he** still thinks the book is better. (Vardhan , et al:2019,377)

Squinting modifier:

Squinting modifier (two-way modifiers) usually refers to a word or phrase that describe either one of two sentence elements. It is a type of misplaced modifiers, and they can change the intended meaning of sentences and create confusion. are usually adverbs. Squinting modifiers are usually adverbs.

Squinting Modifiers Examples:

(72) Sally said **at the prom** Jim embarrassed her.

In the above example, **at the prom** is the modifier. If it refers to the preceding clause, then we have two thoughts:

Sally said at the prom Jim embarrassed her.

Jim embarrassed her.

Since it is a two-way modifier, so the phrase 'at the prom' can be moved to either direction as follows:

At the prom, Sally said Jim embarrassed her.

Sally said Jim embarrassed her **at the prom**.

Squinting modifier: (73) Running in circles **rapidly** made me dizzy.

Here the adverb 'rapidly' can modify the phrases 'running in circles' or 'made me dizzy'

Is it that I was running in circles rapidly?

Or is it that I was made dizzy rapidly?

Squinting modifiers by changing the location of the modifier.

Correct: **Rapidly** running in circles made me dizzy. (Luo:2022)

Limiting Modifiers

Limiting modifier, as its name implies, restricts or limits the meaning of the word it describes. They should occur directly before the word they modify in a sentence.

limiting modifiers can be adverbs such as (almost, exactly, even, just, hardly, merely, nearly, only, scarcely, and simply), adjectives or prepositional phrase.

Limiting Modifier Examples:

Incorrect: (74) **Only** Mary enjoys dancing.

Correct: Mary enjoys **only** dancing.

The first sentence implies that among all other people, Mary is the only one who enjoys dancing. The second sentence implies that the only thing Mary enjoys to do is dancing.

Adjective as limiting modifier: (75) I saw a **small** cat on the street.

In this example, the adjective 'small' modifies the noun 'cat' and it is correct because the position of the adjective is right before the head noun.

Adverb as limiting modifier: (76) I saw **a rather** small cat on the street.

Here, the adverb 'rather' modifies the adjective "small." This means that the cat was a bit small. This sentence is correct because the adverb 'rather' is placed directly before the adjective 'small'.

Prepositional phrase as limiting modifier: I saw a cat **on the street**.

The prepositional phrase 'on the street' modifies the noun 'cat.' This means that the cat was not somewhere else, it was on the street. This sentence is correct because the prepositional phrase "on the street" is placed directly after the noun 'cat'. (Diyanni, et al:2001,379)

Correcting misplaced modifiers

To avoid modifiers errors, we can follow the following:

Misplaced modifier:

It is easy to fix the position of misplaced modifier, this can be simply by changing the placement of the modifier putting it immediately next to the headword either before or after it, for example:

Misplaced modifier:(77) She wore a necklace around her neck **that was too small**.

Post-modifier: She wore a necklace **that was too small** for her neck"

Dangling modifier

In a sentence with dangling modifier, the headword that the modifier is supposed to describe is either omitted or placed somewhere else in the sentence. There are two ways to fix it; one by including the headword in the sentence and two by putting the subject close to the modifier, for example:

Dangling modifier:(78) Most children selected a lunch from the menu **that was high in sugar**.

Most children selected **a lunch that was high in sugar** from the menu.

Most children selected from the menu **a lunch that was high in sugar**.

Squinting modifier

Squinting modifier can be fixed by changing/moving the position of the squinting modifier or by restructuring the sentence.

Squinting modifier: (79)The couple agreed **during the family dinner** they would announce their engagement (Butterfield,2015,62)

Correct: The couple agreed they would announce their engagement **during the family dinner**.

Correct: **During the family dinner**, the couple agreed they would announce their engagement.

Limiting modifier

They should fall immediately before the word or word group they modify, according to meaning. They should appear in front of a verb only if they modify the verb (e.g., I could hardly move.). If they limit the meaning of another word in the sentence, they should appear in front of that word.

(80)John takes only two classes. (restrict the word two)

Only John takes two classes (modify the word John)

(ibid)

Conclusion

Many learners of English as a foreign language face difficulty in writing and producing modifiers. They misplace modifiers when creating their sentences; the form of the sentence will become incorrect semantically and syntactically.

To overcome such difficulty in using these modifiers, here are some points to consider:

1. Modifiers are used to enhance writing by making the sentences more vivid and less vague.
2. The modifier is an optional element in the sentence.
3. To avoid unintended meaning, modifiers must be carefully placed and refer particularly to some word or words in a sentence.
4. There are three types of misplaced modifiers; dangling modifiers, limiting modifiers, and squinting modifiers.
5. Modifiers should occur as close as possible to the person or object that they are describing. When a modifier is not following the rules of typical modifiers, it can create ambiguity and is considered to be a misplaced modifier.
6. Misplaced modifiers can be tricky because of its position in the sentence, it can cause misunderstanding, confusion and unintentional humor.
7. The researchers can easily differentiate between the misplaced modifiers and other types of modifiers, if the meaning of the sentence is vague and not clear, this properly means the modifier is misplaced.
8. There are two strategies for correcting misplaced modifiers; (1) identify the subject of the sentence and attach it along with the modifier, (2) rearranging the sentence's word order to ensure that the modifier is next to the word it is modifying.

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