

Adjectival Phrases in Javanese: Internal Functions

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Javanese Language,
Adjectival Phrase,
Syntax,
Head-Modifier,
Constituent Structure

This study investigates the internal syntactic structure of adjectival phrases in Javanese, focusing on head-modifier relationships and constituent configurations, a topic that remains underexplored in both Javanese linguistics and syntactic theory. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in Aarts and Aarts' syntactic framework, the study analyzed 14 naturally occurring utterances and several written sources from Sidoharjo District, Sragen Regency, Central Java. Data collection involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, while Immediate Constituent Analysis was used to examine the internal composition of each phrase. The findings reveal that Javanese adjectival phrases consistently position the adjective as the head and allow a diverse range of modifiers, including adverbs, nouns, verbs, pronouns, numerals, and adjectives, either before or after the head. These phrases exhibit both endocentric and exocentric patterns and frequently feature discontinuous or stacked modification structures. Such internal flexibility highlights the morphosyntactic richness of Javanese and challenges traditional models of phrase structure. The study contributes both to the descriptive grammar of Javanese and to broader typological perspectives on syntactic organization in morphologically complex languages.

INTRODUCTION

Language remains the central object of linguistic inquiry, as articulated by Lyons (1968), who defines linguistics as the scientific study of language systems and their functional use. This perspective aligns with de Saussure's (1916) foundational view of language as a structured system of human speech, emphasizing its formal organization and social embeddedness. Linguistics as a discipline systematically explores both the diachronic development of languages and the synchronic structures that govern their contemporary usage, attending to the interplay between form, meaning, and context. Modern linguistic science is broadly divided into core subfields, phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, that collectively enable a multidimensional understanding of how language operates as a system of human communication. Among these, syntax plays a pivotal role in uncovering the hierarchical and rule-governed organization of linguistic elements, from words to phrases to clauses. Within syntactic theory, the study of phrase structure is essential for explaining how meaning is composed and modified at intermediate levels of grammatical representation. This study contributes to that domain by focusing on adjectival phrases in Javanese, a syntactic unit that, despite its productivity and typological interest, remains underexamined in both descriptive and theoretical literature.

As a symbolic system, language comprises multiple interdependent structural levels, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, each contributing to the formal coherence and interpretability of linguistic expressions. Among these, syntax occupies a central position, as it addresses the grammatical architecture that enables the

construction of well-formed sentences. Aarts and Aarts (1982) define syntax as the study of how words combine into phrases and how phrases structure into sentences, emphasizing hierarchical relationships and configurational rules. Miller (2002) further highlights syntax as concerned with the relational dynamics among sentence constituents, while Chomsky (2002) frames it as a generative system governed by principles that determine sentence structure and interpretability. Taken together, these perspectives underscore syntax as a theory-driven inquiry into the hierarchical composition of linguistic units, ranging from phrases and clauses to full discourse structures. Within this hierarchy, phrases, particularly adjectival phrases, function as intermediate yet crucial syntactic units, mediating between lexical semantics and sentence-level meaning. Understanding their internal organization is therefore essential to explaining how languages like Javanese encode descriptive and evaluative information syntactically.

Within syntactic analysis, phrases constitute fundamental units that form clauses and sentences, characterized by their distinct internal structure (Aarts & Aarts, 1982). Trask (1999) defines phrases as grammatical units subordinate to clauses, lacking bound verbs and subject-predicate structures (Hudson, 1971). Elson and Pickett (1964) further specify that phrases consist of two or more words without clausal properties, occupying fixed positions within clause structures. Unlike compound words that function as single lexical items, phrases demonstrate syntactic relationships between constituent words while maintaining a subordinate position in the syntactic hierarchy. Cross-linguistic studies typically classify phrases into six major categories: nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial, numeral, and prepositional, each exhibiting unique distributional patterns within sentence structures.

Adjectival phrases play a crucial role in expressing qualities or states of nouns, with their core element being an adjective (Verspoor & Sauter, 2000). These phrases may include modifiers or complements preceding or following the head adjective (Aarts & Aarts, 1982), functioning syntactically as attributes to subjects or objects within sentence structures (Crystal, 1996). Cross-linguistic studies reveal that adjectival phrases exhibit distinct structural and semantic properties across languages, including Javanese. In Javanese, such phrases typically consist of an adjective modified by adverbs or intensifiers (e.g., *sugih banget* “very rich”, *apik tenan* “truly good”). These constructions demonstrate versatile syntactic functions, yet their internal structure, particularly the configuration of heads and modifiers, remains underexplored. Systematic analysis of these patterns provides critical insights into both language-specific syntactic behavior and universal grammatical principles governing adjective modification.

Contemporary linguistic research increasingly recognizes the syntactic richness and configurational diversity of adjectival phrases across languages, particularly in their structural flexibility and cross-categorical modification potential (Haugen, 2013). Recent studies, such as Azizah and Haryadi (2023), have shown that adjectival phrases may exhibit either endocentric or exocentric configurations, incorporating a wide array of modifier types, including verbs, adverbs, nouns, numerals, and pronouns, that interact with the adjectival head in complex syntactic patterns. In the context of Javanese, these phrases reveal a high degree of morphosyntactic plasticity, with modifiers appearing in both pre- and post-head positions, and often in stacked or discontinuous arrangements. These phenomena underscore the internal dynamism of Javanese adjectival phrases, making them a compelling site for investigating phrase-level structure in an

Austronesian typology. However, despite their formal intricacy and potential theoretical significance, Javanese adjectival constructions have remained largely peripheral in syntactic literature. Existing research tends to focus on adjectives in isolation or from a lexical-semantic perspective, neglecting their phrasal realization and structural composition. This oversight marks a substantial gap in both the descriptive grammar of Javanese and the broader field of syntactic typology, especially given the language's typological distinctiveness and its status as one of the most widely spoken local languages in Southeast Asia. A systematic inquiry into the internal architecture of Javanese adjectival phrases is thus not only timely but also essential for advancing both local linguistic documentation and global theoretical models of phrase structure.

Existing studies have examined Javanese adjectives from multiple perspectives, including Sumadi's (2012) morphological analysis of denominal adjective formation through affixation patterns (N-D, mi-D, -um-D, D-an, D-en, N-D-i), each conveying distinct grammatical meanings that demonstrate the language's morphological richness. Shitadewi and Dhanawaty (2021) further classified Malang dialect adjectives into eight semantic categories (color, age, size, speed, condition, etc.), highlighting their crucial role in everyday communication. Complementing these works, Nuryantiningsih et al. (2023) investigated metaphorical adjectives describing human characteristics across six evaluative dimensions (positive/negative traits, mental/physical states). While several studies have investigated Javanese adjectives at the lexical and semantic level, limited research has explored the internal phrase structure, particularly the nature of head-modifier configurations. This gap underscores the need for systematic research examining adjectival phrases as complete syntactic units in Javanese, particularly their structural patterns, grammatical functions, and distributional properties within sentence constructions.

This study undertakes a systematic investigation of the internal syntactic structure of adjectival phrases in Javanese, with a particular emphasis on head-modifier relationships and constituent configurations. While adjectives in Javanese have been previously examined from morphological and semantic perspectives, their phrasal-level organization remains largely underexplored within formal syntactic research. The central research question driving this inquiry is: How are internal structural relationships, particularly head-modifier configurations, realized within Javanese adjectival phrases? Addressing this question is vital not only for advancing descriptive accounts of Javanese grammar, but also for contributing empirical data to broader theoretical discussions on phrase structure in typologically diverse languages. Javanese, as a morpho syntactically rich Austronesian language with extensive modifier flexibility, presents an ideal testing ground for investigating the limits of traditional phrase structure models. By documenting the internal architecture of adjectival phrases, including patterns of endocentricity, pre- and post-modification, and discontinuous modification, this study fills a critical gap in the syntactic typology of Javanese and expands cross-linguistic understanding of phrasal organization. The findings aim to provide foundational insights for both language-specific grammar development and comparative theoretical models of syntax.

Given the paucity of research treating adjectival phrases as primary units of syntactic analysis in Javanese, this study seeks to address a critical gap in both descriptive and theoretical linguistics by conducting a focused investigation into their internal structure. Despite the centrality of adjectival expressions in natural discourse and their typological

significance across languages, Javanese adjectival phrases have received minimal attention as syntactic constructions in their own right. The present research thus concentrates exclusively on the internal configuration of these phrases, with particular attention to the nature of head-modifier relationships, word-class variability among modifiers, and patterns of constituent ordering. By systematically analyzing these structural features, the study aims to uncover the formal principles underlying phrase formation in Javanese and to illustrate the morphosyntactic strategies by which adjectives combine with diverse modifiers. The ultimate goal is to generate empirically grounded insights that enrich both the descriptive grammar of Javanese and broader typological models of phrase structure, especially within the context of morphologically complex Austronesian languages.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to investigate the internal syntactic structure of adjectival phrases in Javanese. A synchronic approach was adopted, focusing on contemporary language use in the Sidoharjo District of Sragen Regency, Central Java. The research was theoretically grounded in Aarts and Aarts (1982) syntactic framework, emphasizing head-modifier relationships and constituent configuration within phrase structures. Supporting this approach, Purnomo (2022) highlights the importance of synchronic analysis for capturing dynamic syntactic features in Javanese, noting that grammatical innovations and dialectal variations are best revealed through descriptive, fieldwork-driven methods rather than prescriptive or diachronic approaches alone (Purnomo, 2022).

Data were collected from January to April 2025 using purposive sampling. The primary sources included: (1) 14 naturally occurring utterances from three native Javanese speakers aged 25–65 with limited mobility, and (2) written sources such as traditional literature and local publications. Data collection techniques consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. All audio recordings were transcribed using standard Javanese orthography and verified by native speakers. Sumarlam et al. (2020) demonstrate the effectiveness of combining naturalistic spoken data with written corpora in field linguistics, arguing that this triangulation enriches theoretical frameworks and ensures the authenticity of syntactic descriptions, especially for under-documented languages and dialects (Sumarlam, dkk., 2020).

The data were analyzed using Immediate Constituent Analysis (ICA) to identify head and modifier elements within each adjectival phrase. Each phrase was examined for its structural pattern (endocentric or exocentric) and the grammatical class of its modifiers (adverb, noun, verb, pronoun, etc.). The analysis excluded external syntactic roles such as predicate, attribute, or complement, and focused solely on the internal organization of the phrase. Analytical rigor was ensured through triangulation with linguistic experts and reference to established syntactic theory. Aronoff and Fudeman (2021) discuss the continued relevance of ICA in morphosyntactic research for languages with rich modifier-head systems, emphasizing the clarity it brings to both hierarchical structure and word-class interactions within phrases (Aronoff & Fudeman, 2021).

Findings are presented descriptively with complete contextual examples, each including: (1) original utterance transcription, (2) Indonesian/English translation, (3) constituent structure analysis, and (4) syntactic function classification. Conclusions were derived inductively from recurring patterns, then contextualized within broader syntactic theory

to address the research objectives regarding the form and function of Javanese adjectival phrases. The study contributes to both Javanese linguistics and syntactic typology through its systematic documentation of phrase-level phenomena. Widodo (2023) illustrates the value of such descriptive, example-driven analysis for typological studies, noting that detailed, context-rich syntactic descriptions from non-Indo-European languages like Javanese are crucial for advancing universal grammar theories (Widodo, 2023).

The literature used in the study was drawn from two major academic databases, Google Scholar and Scopus, with a time span spanning publications from 2021 to 2025. The selection of this time period is based on the start of the implementation of the MSIB Program in 2021, which is the main focus of the study. Selected sources of literature will include scientific articles, books, and research reports discussing the application of MSIB, the influence of ideology in design education, as well as its relation to the improvement of student competence in the context of internships and independent studies.

In terms of data analysis techniques, this study applies bibliometric analysis, which provides an opportunity to evaluate trends and publication patterns in the relevant literature. Bibliometric analysis involves collecting data on the number of publications, citations, keywords, and authors that appear most frequently in related literature. This technique will help identify key topics covered in MSIB-related research, ideologies in design education, and the competencies of design students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Head Function in Javanese Adjectival Phrases

The pivotal role of the adjective as the nucleus within the Javanese adjectival phrase cannot be overstated. In the syntactic architecture of these constructions, the adjectival head not only anchors the phrase semantically but also dictates the combinatorial possibilities with its modifiers. Drawing upon Aarts & Aarts (1982) distinction on internal and external phrase functions, it is evident that the core adjective, invariably occupying the head position, serves as the primary semantic and structural locus around which modifiers, whether pre-posed, postposed, or discontinuous, are organized. This centrality ensures that the phrase's semantic focus remains on the adjectival property, while the surrounding modifiers, drawn from diverse word classes such as adverbs, nouns, verbs, and numerals, serve to nuance, intensify, or specify the head. Such flexibility in modifier placement, however, does not dilute the syntactic primacy of the adjectival nucleus; rather, it highlights the dynamic interplay between structural rigidity, in maintaining the head's centrality, and the creative adaptability of the Javanese adjectival phrase system.

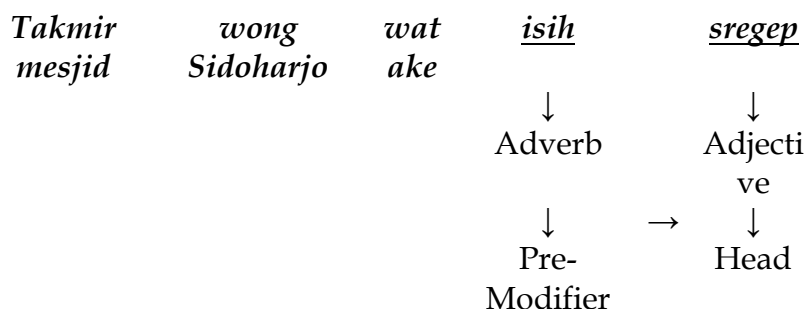
Pre-Modifier Function

A systematic examination of pre-modifiers in Javanese adjectival phrases demonstrates their significant role in shaping both the semantic and syntactic architecture of these constructions. The language's exceptionally flexible system allows adverbial, nominal, verbal, numeral, and even other adjectival elements to precede and qualify the adjectival head, thus expanding the expressive potential of the phrase beyond conventional cross-linguistic expectations. This combinatorial freedom not only challenges rigid phrase-structure models but also raises compelling questions about the distinction between

prototypical modification and quasi-compounding in Javanese syntax. Moreover, the fluidity of pre-modifier usage underscores the dynamic interplay between pragmatic context and grammatical structure, suggesting that Javanese adjectival phrases may serve as a productive test case for typological theories on modifier scope, stacking, and integration in morphologically rich languages.

1. Function as Pre-modifier Realized by Adverb

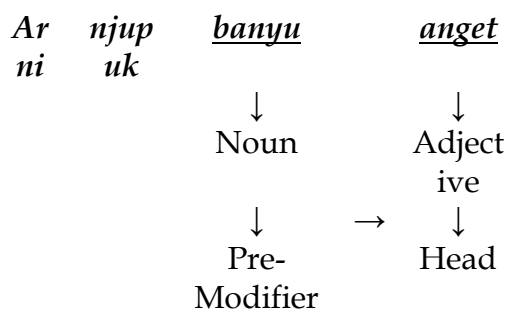
Data : *Takmir mesjid wong Sidoharjo watake isih sregep.*
 Transl : The mosque caretaker from Sidoharjo is still very
 ate diligent in character.



In this example, we observe an adjectival phrase with a modifier preceding the head. The pre-modifier function is realized by the adverb *isih*, meaning “still”, while the head function as the phrase head is expressed by the adjective *sregep*, meaning “diligent”.

2. Function as Pre-modifier Realized by Noun

Data : *Arni njupuk banyu anget.*
 Transl : Arni is getting warm
 ate water.

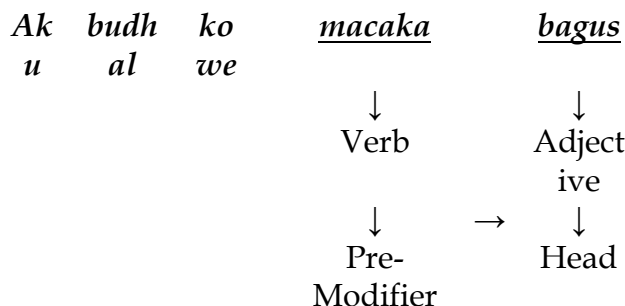


In this example, we observe an adjectival phrase in which a constituent precedes the head. The pre-modifier function is realized by the noun *banyu* “water”, while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *anget* “warm”.

3. Function as Pre-modifier Realized by Verb

Data : *Aku budhal kowe macaka bagus.*

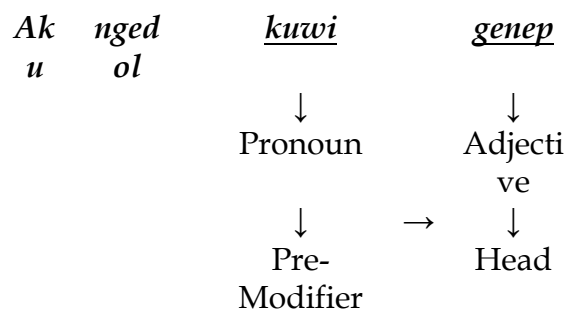
Transla : I'm leaving while you are reading
 te handsomely.



In this example, we observe an adjectival phrase with a constituent preceding the head. The pre-modifier function is realized by the verb *macaka* "dress up", while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *bagus* "handsome".

4. Function as Pre-modifier Realized by Pronoun

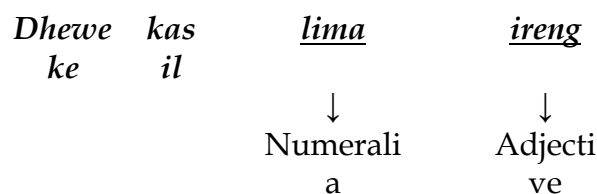
Data : *Aku ngedol kuwi genep.*
 Transl : I'm selling that (it is)
 ate complete.

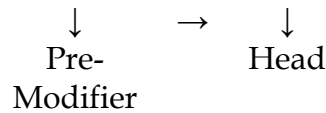


In this example, we observe an adjectival phrase in which a constituent precedes the head. The pre-modifier function is realized by the pronoun *kuwi* "that", while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *genep* "complete".

5. Function as Pre-modifier Realized by Numeralia

Data : *Dheweke kasil lima ireng.*
 Transl : He managed to get
 ate five black

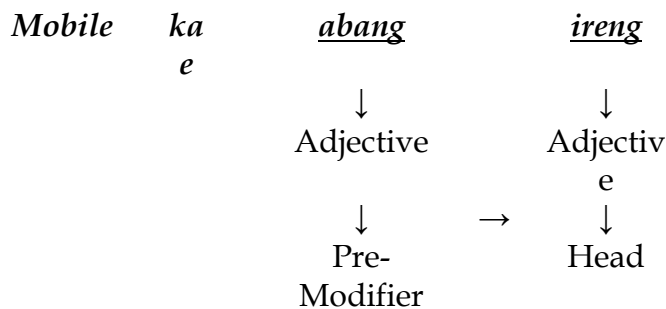




In this example, there is an adjectival phrase in which a constituent precedes the head. The pre-modifier function is realized by the numeral *lima* "five", while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *ireng* "black".

6. Function as Pre-modifier Realized by Adjective

Data : *Mobile kae abang ireng.*
 Transl : The car is red
 ate black.



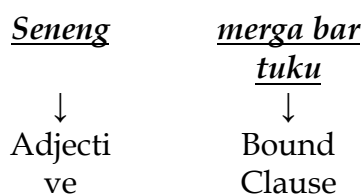
In this example, we observe an adjectival phrase with a constituent preceding the head. The pre-modifier function is realized by the adjective *abang* "red", while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *ireng* "black".

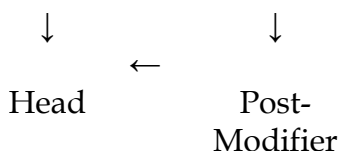
Postmodifier Function

According to Aarts and Aarts (1982: 119), adjectival phrases functioning as postmodifiers can be realized through four forms: the adverb enough, prepositional phrases, bound clauses, and free clauses. However, based on the research findings, no evidence was found for postmodifiers in Javanese realized by the adverb enough or by prepositional phrases. Instead, the present study identified postmodifier constructions that fall outside the framework of Aarts and Aarts, namely adjectival phrases realized by other word categories, such as verbs, nouns, and adverbs.

1. Function as Postmodifier Realized by Bound Clause

Data : *Seneng merga bar tuku.*
 Transl : He is happy because he
 ate just bought.

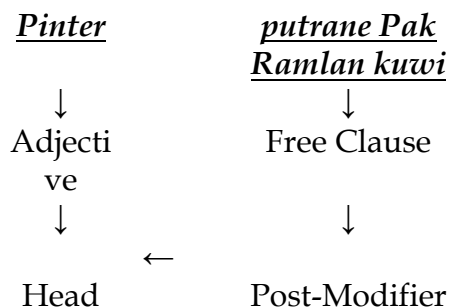




In this example, we observe an adjectival phrase with a constituent following the head. The postmodifier function is realized by the bound clause *merga bar tuku* "because he just bought", while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *seneng* "glad".

2. Function as Postmodifier Realized by a Free Clause

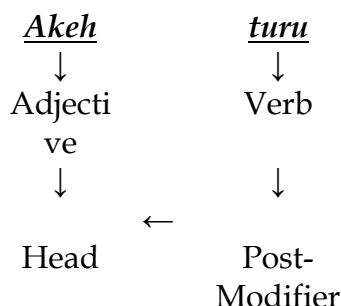
Data : *Pinter putrane Pak Ramlan kuwi.*
 Transl : Pak Ramlan's child is
 ate smart.



In this example, there is an adjectival phrase with a constituent that follows the head. The postmodifier function is realized by the free clause *putrane Pak Ramlan kuwi* "Pak Ramlan's child", while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *pinter* "smart". Moreover, data was found that does not fit the theoretical classification, namely adjectival phrases with postmodifiers realized by various word class categories.

3. Function as Postmodifier Realized by Verb

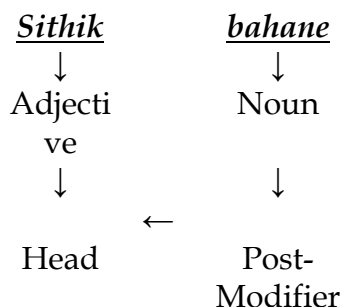
Data : *Akeh turu.*
 Transl : Sleepings a
 ate lot.



In this example, there is an adjectival phrase with a constituent that follows the head. The postmodifier function is realized by the verb *туру* "sleep", while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *akeh* "a lot" or "many".

4. Function as Postmodifier Realized by Noun

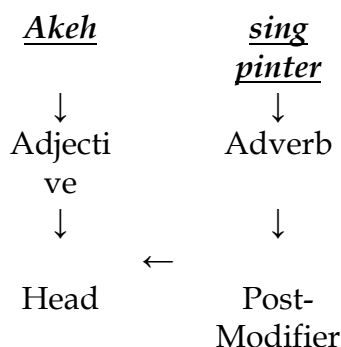
Data : *Sithik bahane*.
Transl : There's a bit of
ate supplies.



In this example, there is an adjectival phrase with a constituent that follows the head. The postmodifier function is realized by the noun *bahane* ("the material" or "ingredient"), while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *sithik* ("little" or "few").

5. Function as Postmodifier Realized by Adverb

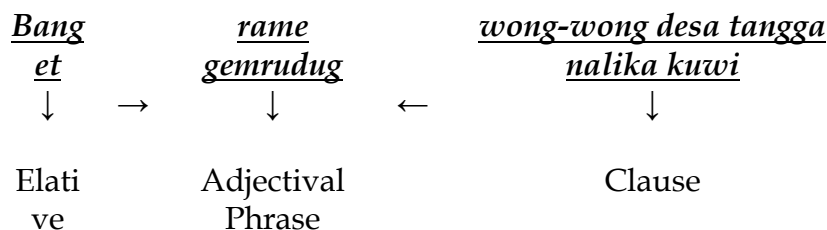
Data : *Akeh sing pinter*.
Transl : There are many who
ate are smart.



In this example, there is an adjectival phrase with a constituent that follows the head. The postmodifier function is realized by the adverbial *sing pinter* ("who are smart" or "the smart ones"), while the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *akeh* ("many"). Adjectival phrases where the postmodifier is realized by various word classes, as previously discussed, are consistent with *Kridalaksana's* (1985: 126–129) view. He argues that in Indonesian, adjectival phrases have adjectives as their heads and may be modified by elements of any word class. In other words, adjectival phrase modifiers can derive from various word classes.

Discontinuous Modifier Function

Data : *Banget rame gemrudug.*
 Transl : It's super crowded
 ate and chaotic.



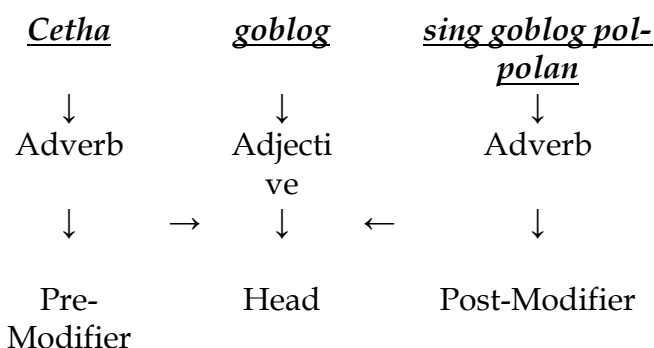
The Javanese data align with the view of Aarts and Aarts (1982: 121), who state that discontinuous modifiers meet certain criteria and are realized through constructions such as "so + adjective + that clause" or "as to-clause."

Premodifier and Postmodifier Functions

The research data classified in this section are not covered by the theory of Aarts and Aarts (1982), who state that adjectival phrases can have discontinuous modifiers. In this section, the researcher distinguishes between premodifiers and postmodifiers that are realized by both the same word class and by different word classes.

1. Function as a Postmodifier Realized by an Adverb

Data : *Cetha goblog sing goblog pol-
polan.*
 Transl : Utterly foolish, the dumbest of
 ate them all.



In this sentence, the underlined adjectival phrase exhibits a structure in which the premodifier function is realized by the adverb *cetha* ("truly" or "really"), the postmodifier function is realized by the adverb *sing goblog pol-polan* ("the very dumb one" or "the utterly ignorant youth"), and the head function is realized by the adjective *goblog* ("seriously stupid" or "extremely foolish"). The data presented above align with the pattern described by Kridalaksana (1985: 128), namely "adverb + adjective + adverb."

2. Function as a Postmodifier Realized by a Different Category

Data	:	<i>Temen</i>		<i>seneng</i>		<i>nagasari</i> .
Transl	:	Really	fond	of		nagasari.
ate						
<u><i>Temen</i></u>		<u><i>seneng</i></u>		<u><i>nagasari</i></u>		
Benar- benar		suka		nagasari		
↓		↓		↓		
Adverb		Adjecti ve		Noun		
↓	→	↓	←	↓		
Pre- Modifier		Head		Post- Modifier		

In this data, there is an adjectival phrase that consists of a constituent preceding and following the head. The premodifier function is realized by the adverb *temen* ("really"), the head function of the phrase is realized by the adjective *seneng* ("like" or "fond of"), and the postmodifier function is realized by the noun *nagasari* ("nagasari").

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Javanese adjectival phrases exhibit a high degree of internal structural flexibility, characterized by a variety of head-modifier configurations. The adjective consistently serves as the central head element, while modifiers may be realized by diverse word classes, including adverbs, nouns, verbs, pronouns, numerals, and even other adjectives. These modifiers occur both before and after the head, reflecting a dynamic and non-linear syntactic organization. Additionally, discontinuous modification and multiple-modifier constructions were observed, further indicating the complex internal architecture of adjectival phrases in Javanese. These findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of phrase structure in morpho syntactically rich languages and highlight the necessity of further typological research on Javanese syntax at the phrasal level. The study's focus on internal function also provides an empirical foundation for refining phrase-structure theory in Austronesian linguistics.

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