

Abstract. Postnominal adjectives in German constitute a marginal yet systematic construction that challenges canonical assumptions about DP structure and adjectival agreement. While German adjectives ordinarily appear prenominally and obligatorily inflect for case, number, and gender, expressions such as *Whisky pur* and *Wahlkampf pur* surface without inflection and with a restricted lexical inventory. In contrast, forms such as *etwas Schönes* display full agreement despite postnominal position. This paper develops a unified analysis in which both bare and inflected postnominals derive from DP-internal small clause structures. The noun functions as the subject of predication and the adjective as its predicate. Bare postnominals lack agreement because no ϕ -bearing licensing head is introduced in D° , whereas inflected postnominals arise when a pronominal or quantificational head triggers Agree. Competing analyses—fragments, apposition, and extraposition—fail to capture the agreement asymmetry, lexical restriction, and determiner interaction. The proposed account shows that German DP architecture must independently permit nominal predication distinct from attributive modification. Postnominal adjectives therefore provide direct evidence that adjectival agreement reflects structural licensing rather than linear position, and that predication inside the DP is grammatically available but stylistically constrained.

Keywords. German; Postnominal modification; DP-internal predication; Agreement asymmetry; Quantificational determiners; Small clause structure

1. Introduction

German nominal modification is often presented as a paradigm case of rigidity. Adjectives typically precede the noun and, in attributive position, they obligatorily inflect for case, number, gender, and determiner type (Gallmann 1996). This tight coupling between position and morphology is commonly derived from a richly articulated DP spine in which adjectival modifiers are licensed in specifier positions of functional projections and receive ϕ -feature valuation under Agree (Haider 1992, 2000, 2010). Against this canonical picture, noun–adjective strings in which the adjective follows the noun appear to violate two expectations at once: the adjective occurs in a noncanonical position, and it may surface without inflection.

The phenomenon is easiest to see in compact expressions such as *Whisky pur*, *Wahlkampf pur*, or *Polemik satt*, which have become recognizable stylistic devices in journalistic prose and headlines (Dürscheid 2002; Trost 2011). These examples behave as single DPs embedded in full clauses, yet the adjective appears in citation form. Alongside this bare subtype, German also permits postnominal adjectives that are fully inflected in the presence of quantificational or pronominal heads, as in *etwas Schönes* or *nichts Neues*. The co-occurrence of bare and inflected postnominals raises a more precise question than “why postnominal adjectives exist”: why does postnominal placement sometimes correlate with the absence of adjectival agreement, while in other cases agreement is obligatory?

This paper develops a unified analysis in which both subtypes instantiate DP-internal predication. The noun functions as the subject of a small clause and the adjective as its predicate.

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The crucial ingredient is that adjectival inflection is not a necessary property of adjectival meaning or of modification per se; rather, it is a morphological reflex of ϕ -feature valuation when the nominal spine contains an appropriate probing head. Bare postnominals arise when D° does not introduce an agreement probe, so no valuation relation reaches the adjectival predicate and the adjective remains uninflected. Inflected postnominals arise when a pronominal or quantificational element in D° carries unvalued ϕ -features and probes the predicate, yielding the familiar -es morphology in neuter singular. On this view, the construction provides direct evidence for an architectural dissociation: predication inside the DP can be available even when attributive agreement licensing is absent.

The argument is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the descriptive generalizations and the main analytical options in the literature. Section 3 presents the core empirical contrasts, focusing on morphology, determiner interaction, coordination, and lexical restriction. Section 4 evaluates fragment, appositional, and extraposition-based analyses and shows that they fail to derive the agreement split and the lexical distribution simultaneously. Section 5 develops the small clause analysis and states its assumptions about DP structure and Agree. Section 6 discusses register and pragmatic effects as interface conditions on the availability of the bare subtype. Section 7 draws out broader consequences for theories of nominal agreement and the internal architecture of the German DP.

2. Background and descriptive generalizations

Descriptive work has long noted that German tolerates a narrow range of “after-N” adjectives, often in fixed or semi-fixed expressions. Marschall (1992) discusses postnominal adjectives in poetry and stylized prose, emphasizing their markedness and limited productivity. Dürscheid (2002) provides the first systematic study of uninflected postnominal adjectives such as *pur* and *satt*, arguing that they behave differently from ordinary descriptive adjectives and contribute an intensifying or evaluative meaning. Trost (2011) traces the rise and spread of these expressions in contemporary journalistic registers, showing that they function as compact, rhetorically punchy devices, in political reporting and commentary. Masiero (2023) examines the same construction from a translational perspective and shows that Italian renderings typically paraphrase rather than preserve the German postnominal syntax, which suggests that the construction packages meaning and style in a language-specific way.

At the same time, grammars of German have long treated inflected postnominal adjectives in quantificational DPs as unremarkable. Examples like *etwas Schönes* and *nichts Neues* are standard and appear in a wide range of registers. They are often discussed in connection with pronominal or quantifier-like heads and the distribution of strong adjective endings (Haider 2010). The empirical challenge is to connect this well-behaved inflected pattern to the stylized bare pattern without collapsing crucial differences.

Two generalizations are especially stable across the descriptive literature. First, the bare subtype is lexically restricted. The adjectives that appear productively in the construction are typically *pur*, *satt*, *brutal*, *total*, and *light* (Dürscheid 2002; Masiero 2023). Second, the bare subtype is stylistically marked. It is common in headlines and slogans but rare in formal prose, legal writing, or technical registers (Trost 2011). The inflected subtype lacks both restrictions: its adjective slot is productive and its distribution is not tied to a particular register.

Any adequate analysis must therefore derive at least four facts together: (i) bare postnominals are integrated DPs, not punctuation-separated appositions; (ii) they are uninflected; (iii) they show a narrow lexical inventory and resist “ordinary” descriptive adjectives; (iv) inflected postnominals exist and show full agreement when a quantificational head is present.

3. Core data and diagnostics

3.1 Bare, uninflected postnominals

Bare postnominals are exemplified in (1)–(3) and embed naturally inside full clauses, as in (1a)–(1c). Glosses are provided for clarity; the relevant point is morphological form and constituency.

(1)

a.

Er	bestell-te	Whisky	pur.
Er	bestell-te	Whisky	pur
he.NOM.M.SG	order-PST.3SG	whisky.ACC.M.SG	pure.ADJ.INFL

‘He ordered whisky neat.’

b.

Für	die	Zuschauer	war	das
Für	die	Zuschauer	war	das
For	DEF.ART.ACC.PL	viewer-PL	be.PST.3SG	DEM.NOM.N.SG

Wahl-kampf	pur.
Wahl-kampf	pur
election-campaign.NOM.M.SG	pure.ADJ.INFL

‘For the viewers, that was pure electioneering.’

c.

Nach	dem	Streit	gab	es
Nach	dem	Streit	gab	es
After	DEF.ART.DAT.M.SG	argument.DAT.M.SG	give.PST.3SG	EXPL.NOM.N.SG

Polemik	satt.
Polemik	satt
polemics.ACC.F.SG	full.ADJ.INFL

‘After the argument there was polemics galore.’

In all three cases, the adjective is bare. In canonical attributive position, the corresponding forms require inflection, and, for some items, the attributive paraphrase fails to preserve the intensifying reading. The contrast is clearest with *pur*. Prenominal *der reine Whisky* expresses descriptive purity, while *Whisky pur* is naturally interpreted as ‘neat’ or ‘nothing but whisky’, a reading that aligns with evaluative predication rather than descriptive modification.

A first constituency diagnostic is the absence of appositive punctuation or comma intonation. The constructions are typically written without commas and are interpreted as tight N+Adj units. A third diagnostic is that the construction resists expansion into a relative clause without a change in information structure and pragmatic force. For example, *Wahlkampf pur* is not naturally paraphrased as *Wahlkampf, der pur ist*; the relative clause produces an afterthought flavor and loses the headline-like compression.

3.2 Inflected postnominals

Inflected postnominals are illustrated in (2).

(2)

a.

Er	such-te	etwas
Er	such-te	etwas
he.NOM.M.SG	seek-PST.3SG	something.INDF.N.ACC.SG

Schön-es.
 Schön-es
 beautiful-STR.N.ACC.SG
 ‘He was looking for something beautiful.’

b.

Im	Bericht	stand,	es
Im	Bericht	stand	es
In.DEF.ART.DAT.M.SG	report.DAT.M.SG	stand.PST.3SG	EXPL.NOM.N.SG

gebe	nichts	Neu-es.
gebe	nichts	Neu-es
give.SBJV.3SG	nothing.INDF.N.ACC.SG	new-STR.N.ACC.SG

‘The report said there was nothing new.’

Here the adjective surfaces with neuter singular -es, the morphology expected under agreement with the pronominal/quantificational head. These DPs are not stylistically marked and can occur in formal registers. The inflected subtype therefore behaves as a regular part of the determiner system.

3.3 Lexical restriction and semantic contribution

The lexical restriction of the bare subtype is clear. Speakers accept *Whisky pur*, *Skandal pur*, *Stress pur*, *Kritik pur*, and *Wahlkampf pur*, while rejecting, or strongly disfavoring, **Whisky kalt* or **Whisky teuer*. The restriction is not merely syntactic; it correlates with meaning. The adjectives that participate tend to be evaluative or intensifying predicates rather than descriptive properties. *Pur* contributes an “only/just” or “quintessential” meaning; *satt* contributes abundance; *total* and *brutal* contribute evaluative intensity; *light* contributes a marketed, label-like evaluation. This suggests that the bare construction packages predication plus rhetorical compression, rather than mere modification.

3.4 Coordination and category diagnostics

Coordination supports a predicative analysis. Bare postnominals coordinate readily with other evaluative predicates:

(3) *Das war Wahlkampf pur und brutal.*
 ‘That was pure and brutal electioneering.’

In contrast, coordination between a bare postnominal and an ordinary descriptive adjective is degraded when the descriptive adjective is intended as an attributive modifier of the noun:

(4) **Wahlkampf pur und schmutzig (in diesem Sinne).*
 intended: ‘pure and dirty electioneering’

The asymmetry is expected if *pur* and *brutal* occupy a predicative slot, while *schmutzig* would need attributive licensing to yield the intended reading. More generally, the construction behaves like a compact predicate of the noun, not like a freely combinable postnominal modifier.

4. Why competing analyses fall short

Three analytical families are commonly invoked: fragment analyses, appositional analyses, and extraposition analyses.

4.1 Fragments

Fragment-based approaches treat reduced structures as legitimate syntactic objects with predicative force (Progovac 2006, 2015; Lemke 2021). Bare postnominals share a reduced, headline-like feel, so a fragment perspective captures part of their discourse profile. The problem is that the relevant strings are not discourse fragments: they occur inside larger clauses as DPs. Moreover, fragment theories do not predict the sharp lexical restriction, and they do not derive the systematic split between bare and inflected postnominals conditioned by determiner type. If reduced predication were freely available, one would expect broader adjectival participation and weaker dependence on D° .

4.2 Apposition

Appositional accounts (Heringa 2011) explain postnominal material as afterthought commentary. Some postnominal adjectives can indeed sound comment-like when separated by a pause. However, the German bare construction typically lacks prosodic separation and punctuation, and it behaves as a single constituent. Apposition also fails to derive the agreement split: appositional adjectives are not expected to be morphologically sensitive to whether the DP contains *etwas* or a null determiner. The morphology, however, tracks the presence of a licensing head.

4.3 Extraposition

Extraposition analyses (Meinunger 2009; Zwart 2007) have more purchase on the inflected subtype. It is plausible that postnominal placement in *etwas Schönes* reflects displacement from an underlying prenominal position, especially given the regular agreement. But the bare subtype resists an extraposition treatment because it lacks an acceptable prenominal source that preserves interpretation. While *der reine Whisky* is grammatical, it does not yield the same intensifying meaning as *Whisky pur*, and, for some items, the attributive configuration is itself degraded with the intended reading. Movement analyses require a licit base position; the lack of an appropriate base undermines extraposition for the bare subtype.

4.4 Summary

Fragments capture reducedness but miss determiner-conditioned agreement and lexical restriction. Apposition captures a possible discourse flavor but misses tight constituency and morphological dependencies. Extraposition captures some inflected cases but cannot derive bare intensifiers without positing an unattested source. These failures converge on a structural conclusion: the adjective must be merged as a predicate inside the DP in a configuration that is available without attributive agreement licensing.

5. A DP-internal small clause analysis

5.1 Structural proposal

I propose that both subtypes instantiate DP-internal predication: D° selects a small clause (SC) whose subject is an NP and whose predicate is an AP. This general approach draws on small clause analyses for nonverbal predication (Aarts 1992) and on work arguing that predication can be hosted inside nominal phrases (Bennis, Corver, and den Dikken 1997; den Dikken 2006). The core configuration is:

(5) [DP D° [SC NP AP]]

The noun heads NP and provides the subject of predication; the adjective heads AP and provides the predicate. Predication is established structurally by the SC configuration itself. Whether one implements this with a relator head (in the spirit of den Dikken 2006) or with a

minimal Pred/SC projection, the essential point is the same: the adjective is not an attributive modifier in the canonical DP spine, but a predicate in a predicational layer.

5.2 Agreement as contingent on a probing head

The central morphosyntactic claim is that adjectival inflection is not automatic in predicational configurations. Instead, inflection arises when a ϕ -bearing head in the nominal domain probes the adjectival predicate and values its features, yielding overt morphology. I assume a standard probe–goal conception of Agree (Chomsky 2000, 2001) and the view that agreement requires the presence of an appropriate probe; agreement can fail or be absent if the relevant probe is not introduced (Preminger 2014).

In bare postnominals, D° is null and does not carry unvalued ϕ -features. The DP therefore contains no probe that can value features on the predicate AP. The adjective surfaces without inflection because it is not in an attributive agreement configuration and no independent probing head reaches it.

In inflected postnominals, a pronominal/quantificational element (etwas, nichts, vieles, etc.) occupies D° and introduces unvalued ϕ -features. From this position, D° probes into its SC complement and establishes Agree with the closest ϕ -bearing goal, which is the adjectival predicate. The result is valued morphology, yielding schön-es, neu-es, and related forms.

5.3 Deriving the two subtypes

Bare subtype: D° selects SC, but D° lacks an agreement probe. The AP predicate is morphologically unmarked, surfacing as pur, satt, brutal, total, light.

Inflected subtype: D° contains a pronominal/quantificational head with $[u\phi]$. D° probes the AP predicate and values its features, producing the strong ending -es in the neuter singular environment.

This derives the agreement split without positing two unrelated constructions. The linear postnominal position is constant; the difference lies in the licensing environment created by D° .

5.4 Why lexical restriction emerges

The analysis predicts that any adjective could, in principle, be a predicate in an SC. The fact that only a small set of adjectives participates in the bare subtype must therefore be explained at the interface. I propose that the bare construction is a marked packaging strategy that requires the adjective to function as an intensifying or evaluative predicate that supports rhetorical compression. Descriptive adjectives like kalt and teuer can be predicates in clausal small clauses, but they do not naturally yield the compact “label-like” evaluation associated with the bare DP-internal construction. The restriction is thus not a narrow syntactic ban on descriptive adjectives, but a constructional and discourse constraint: only certain predicates are felicitous in the relevant register-driven packaging.

This aligns with the descriptive observation that the bare subtype thrives in headlines and slogans, where the goal is not to add a descriptive property but to deliver a compressed stance: “pure electioneering,” “nothing but scandal,” “polemics galore.” The adjectives in the restricted set are precisely those that easily encode stance and degree.

5.5 Determiner interaction and the morphology split

The proposal also explains a subtle but important asymmetry in how determiners interact with the two subtypes. In the inflected subtype, the quantificational head is not merely present; it is the locus of the feature bundle that makes agreement possible. This predicts that replacing something like etwas with an ordinary definite determiner should not yield “the same” postnominal configuration with inflection, because the definite article does not behave as a pronominal quantifier head that independently supplies the relevant probing relation in the same way. Speakers

tend instead to revert to canonical prenominal attribution (das schöne X) or to clausal predication (das X ist schön). In other words, the postnominal slot is structurally available as a predicate position, but agreement morphology is available only when D° contains the right kind of element to project the agreement-relevant features into the DP. This captures the observed correlation, emphasized in the descriptive literature, between the bare subtype and determiner absence, and between the inflected subtype and pronominal/quantificational heads.

5.6 A brief comparison with English and related Germanic patterns

English is well known to allow postnominal adjectives in several environments (Bolinger 1967), including after certain quantifiers (something strange), in fixed expressions (attorney general), and in stylistically elevated or legal registers (the people responsible). German differs sharply in that ordinary descriptive adjectives are not productive in the after-N position; when German allows postnominals, they either appear in the quantifier-licensed inflected pattern (etwas Schönes) or in the lexically restricted bare intensifier pattern (X pur). The cross-linguistic contrast is useful because it suggests that “postnominal adjective” is not a single phenomenon but a family of structures whose availability depends on how a language distributes predication and agreement across the nominal spine. The German facts, in particular, show that restricting after-N adjectives does not require banning postnominal APs outright; instead, German restricts the configurations in which they are discourse-felicitous and the configurations in which they can participate in agreement. This is exactly what the small clause analysis makes possible.

6. Interface licensing and register

Trost (2011) shows that the bare construction became especially visible in journalistic German, with recurrent templates such as X pur and X satt. These templates function as stylistic intensifiers: they compress an evaluative proposition into a two-word DP that can headline a paragraph or serve as a memorable sound bite. Masiero (2023) demonstrates that translation typically opts for paraphrase, suggesting that the pragmatic effect is not reducible to compositional meaning alone; it is the combination of syntax, brevity, and conventionalization that produces the effect.

On the present analysis, the grammar makes DP-internal predication available; register determines whether speakers exploit that option in its bare form. The inflected subtype is not comparably constrained because it is already integrated into the determiner system and does not rely on rhetorical compression. A DP like etwas Schönes is not a headline device; it is a normal quantified DP.

A useful way to formalize this is to treat the bare subtype as requiring a licensing condition at the syntax–discourse interface: the DP is interpreted as a compact predication whose discourse function is evaluative labeling. If the discourse context does not support such labeling, speakers default to canonical attributive modification (der reine Whisky) or to clausal predication (der Whisky ist pur). This captures the empirical asymmetry: bare postnominals are grammatical but pragmatically marked.

7. Consequences for DP theory

7.1 Predication inside DP

The analysis entails that the German DP cannot be modeled as containing only attributive modification slots. It must also permit a predicative layer in which an NP and an AP stand in a subject–predicate relation. This conclusion is independently motivated by cross-linguistic work on predication in nominal phrases (Bennis et al. 1997; den Dikken 2006), but the German data add a distinctive kind of evidence: morphological agreement (or its absence) diagnoses the structural configuration.

7.2 Agreement is not tied to adjectivehood

If attributive agreement were an intrinsic property of adjectives in DP, the bare subtype should be impossible. The fact that *pur* surfaces uninflected in a DP-internal configuration shows that agreement is contingent on licensing. Agreement thus tracks the presence of a probing head, not the mere presence of an AP. This supports approaches in which ϕ -feature valuation is structurally mediated and can be absent when the probe is not introduced.

7.3 A unified treatment of inflected postnominals

Inflected postnominals are sometimes treated as a separate phenomenon, potentially derived by extraposition. The present analysis offers a unification: inflected postnominals are also predicates in DP-internal small clauses, but they occur in a DP whose D° contains a probe. This keeps the postnominal position constant across the two subtypes and explains why agreement appears exactly where D° is overtly filled by quantificational material.

7.4 Testable predictions

The proposal yields several predictions. First, bare postnominals should resist the full range of determiner environments that introduce agreement probes; inserting an overt determiner should either force an attributive parse or trigger inflection, altering the construction's stylistic profile. Second, coordination should pattern with predicative coordination rather than attributive coordination, as observed. Third, if the bare subtype is discourse-licensed, its acceptability should be sensitive to context manipulations that increase the plausibility of evaluative labeling (headline contexts, slogans) versus neutral descriptive contexts. These predictions connect the syntactic proposal to the distributional facts emphasized in the descriptive literature.

8. Conclusion

German postnominal adjectives present a small but theoretically high-yield domain. The empirical landscape includes a bare subtype, exemplified by *Whisky pur* and *Polemik satt*, and an inflected subtype, exemplified by *etwas Schönes* and *nichts Neues*. The key fact is that postnominal placement does not uniformly correlate with agreement; rather, agreement tracks the presence of a licensing head in D° . Competing analyses based on fragments, apposition, or extraposition fail to derive the full cluster of properties, particularly the determiner-conditioned agreement split and the narrow lexical inventory of the bare subtype.

The small clause analysis developed here unifies both subtypes: D° selects a predicational SC in which NP is the subject and AP the predicate. Bare postnominals arise when D° does not introduce a ϕ -probe, so the adjective surfaces without inflection. Inflected postnominals arise when a quantificational/pronominal head in D° introduces $[u\phi]$ and probes the predicate, yielding overt agreement morphology. Lexical restriction and register sensitivity follow from interface licensing: the bare construction is a marked packaging strategy for evaluative stance in rhetorically compressed registers.

More broadly, the construction forces an architectural conclusion about the German DP. Nominal predication must be structurally available independently of attributive licensing projections, and adjectival agreement must be dissociated from adjectival modification itself. Postnominal adjectives thus provide direct evidence that nominal attribution and nominal predication are distinct relations, and that agreement morphology is a reflex of the latter only when the nominal spine contains the appropriate probing head.

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