


Noun Phrases
with *So*-adj Predeterminers:
So complicated a matter



Aleš Klégr

Abstract

The paper investigates NPs with so-adj predeterminers using a sample gathered from the BNC and some additional sources. A quantitative analysis resulting in an overview of variants of this type of NP and their syntactic functions is followed by a discussion of the possible origin of this construction and its features.

1 INTRODUCTION

Among the many peculiarities of English article usage is the position of the indefinite article after attributive adjectives preceded by *so* and several other items. It has been long remarked on both by grammarians and stylists. Thus Jespersen (1933: 178), to name but one, notes that “[t]he indefinite article naturally precedes an adjective [...] There are, however, some exceptions to this rule. *How* and *however*, like other interrogatives and relative words, come first and attract the adjective: similarly with *so*, *as*, *too* and *no less*.” As an example, he gives *We could not do it in so short a time*, and leaves it at that.

Burchfield (1998: 2), in his revision of Fowler’s usage handbook, also raises this point, saying “[t]he indefinite article normally precedes the word or words it determines (*a popular history*). However, it follows the adjectives *many*, *such*, and *what* (*many a year*, *such a family*, *what an awful nuisance!*). It also follows any adjective preceded by *as* or *how* (*Iris Murdoch is as good a writer as Virginia Woolf*; *he did not know how tiresome a person she would be*), and often an adjective preceded by *so* (*so bold a move deserved success*), but *such a bold move* is more usual.” Interestingly, in the previous edition of Fowler revised by Gowers (1965: 1) we find an additional remark on this structure left out in Burchfield’s edition: “[A, an], follow [...] (ii) usually any adjective preceded by *so* (*so resolute an attempt deserved success*; *a so resolute attempt* is also English but suggests affectation) [...]”

The present study focuses only on structures with *so* in order to reduce the scope to a manageable size and to avoid mixing up several things. The aim is to describe the use of the *so-adj-a* sequence as fully as possible and to capture the essence of this structure. The *so-adj-a* sequence preceding the noun is an example of a syntactic phenomenon the examination of which

is enormously aided by the use of corpus data. Thanks to such data it is possible to explore what is likely to be the almost complete range of variations this sequence may have and accordingly to state its rules of and restraints on usage, drawing on data from the *BNC* and a dedicated collection of examples from other sources. The study is in fact an attempt to describe the local grammar of this construction.

2 STANDARD CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL

The starting point will be the information on the *so-adj-a* sequence in the two largest contemporary theoretical grammars of English, Quirk et al. (1985; *CGEL* for short) and Huddleston-Pullum (2002; *CamGEL*); the third such grammar, Biber et al. (1999), apparently has no reference to this sequence. The picture is complemented by a note from Swan's (2005) practical handbook of present-day English.

There are two relevant references to this sequence in *CGEL*. The first one appears in the section on premodification by adjectives (*CGEL*: 1323). It notes that some intensifiers, though normal before predicative adjectives (*her daughter who is so beautiful*), tend to be avoided with premodifying adjectives as the shift from predicative position to premodification "would seem a little gushy" (*her so beautiful daughter*). One solution, with indefinite determiners including zero, is to replace *so* by *such* (*a daughter / daughters who is/are so beautiful; such a beautiful daughter / such beautiful daughters*). Another solution, in rather formal contexts, is to place *so* plus adjective before the indefinite article (*so beautiful a daughter*).

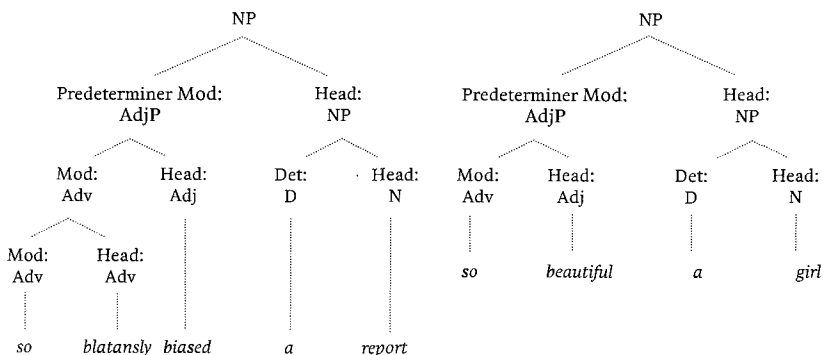
The other reference is in the section on adjectives with complementation (*ibid*: 420–421). It points out that adjectives

modified by *enough*, *too*, or *so* can be separated from its complementation if placed before the indefinite (or zero) article of the noun (*She is brave enough a student to attempt the course; It was too boring a book to read). With *so*, it is noted, this kind of construction is also possible if the adjective phrase is part of the subject or object (*a man so difficult to please / so difficult a man to please must be hard to work with*).*

CamGEL (329–331, 435), in the section on functions in the structure of the NP, distinguishes between internal and external dependents. Dependents are external if they are immediate constituents of an NP (not a noun or nominal), as is the case with the determiner. In addition to the determiner, external dependents include two kinds of **external modifier** that modify the NP: predeterminer modifiers (predeterminers for short) and peripheral modifiers (in the form of adverbs, PPs, or reflexive pronouns, *Jill herself*). According to *CamGEL* predeterminer modifiers come in several forms, including the determinatives *all* and *both*, fractions, multipliers (*twice*, etc.), and a few adjectives (e.g. *such*) or adjective phrases (e.g. *how large a piece*). The latter group, called **adjectival predeterminers**, subsumes three subgroups: *such* and exclamative *what*, AdjPs introduced by the degree adverbs *more* and *less* and, finally, AdjPs introduced by the degree modifiers *as*, *so*, *how*, *this*, and *that*.

Furthermore, the authors note that AdjPs of this type can function as pre-head modifier only in external position before *a*, and point out the restrictedness of their distribution compared to that of *such* and *what*, “while *such a good bargain* is equivalent to *so good a bargain*, the plural *such good bargains* has no counterpart **so good bargains*.” However, this restriction to NPs preceded by *a/an* disappears if the AdjP is used “in post-head internal modifier function: *He had a nose so long he reminded me of Pinocchio; He had hair so long that it reached down to his knees*.”

CamGEL makes another important observation, i.e., *so* need not be a modifier of the adjective itself, as in *It was so blatantly biased a report that no one took any notice of it*, where it is part of an adverb phrase modifying the adjective. Instances such as *so blatantly* are described by *CamGEL* as ‘submodification’ (see 547–548). The NP structure of both variants can be represented by the following tree diagrams:



Swan’s *Practical English Usage* (2005: 10) contains only a brief note on adjectives positioned after *as*, *how*, *so* and *too*. It is interesting in that it clashes with *CGEL*: while *CGEL* describes *her so beautiful daughter* as tending to be avoided for seeming a little gushy, Swan claims that the “structure is not possible without *a/an*” and prohibits sentences like *I like your so beautiful country*. It does agree with *CGEL* in describing the structure as “common in a formal style”. The only model example it gives, *It was so warm a day that I could hardly work*, contains postmodification.

The restrictions and features concerning the *so-AdjP-a* structure that are mentioned in these three sources are chiefly syntactic: the structure is incompatible with the zero article and plural NPs (*CGEL*, *CamGEL*), pragmatically highly marked with the

possessive (*CGEL*), incompatible with anything but the indefinite article (Swan); the structure (when complemented) is limited to subject and object positions (*CGEL*); the exclusion of plural NPs does not apply when the *so-AdjP* structure is postponed (*CamGEL*); the *AdjP* may be premodified not by *so*, but by *AdvP* modified by *so* (*CamGEL*). Finally, NPs with *so-adj* predeterminers are stylistically restricted to formal contexts (*CGEL*, Swan).

3 DATA ANALYSIS: THE *BNC* SAMPLE

A search in the *BNC* yielded a sample of 637 occurrences of the *so-adj-a/an-N* structure (and its variants). The sample analysis focuses on four aspects: (1) premodification of the NP (distribution of predeterminer and postdeterminer modifiers); (2) syntactic functions of NPs with *so-adj* predeterminers; (3) semantics of the pre- and postdeterminer adjectives. As the purpose of analysing the *so-adj-a* structure is to reveal as complete a range of its variants and the distribution of their features which is expected to contribute to its description, the *BNC* data is supplemented by another collection of close to one hundred examples gathered from various occasional sources (fiction, the *Times* corpus, etc.) that were considered as well.

3.1 Premodification of the NPs with *so-adj* predeterminers

As even a cursory glance at the *BNC* sample shows that these NPs are far more varied than the above grammars suggest, the sample was subject to analysis to determine the actual diversity. Unlike in the literature reviewed where only the basic type *so-adj-a/an-N* and the type *so-adv-adj a/an-N* are mentioned, the sample includes two more types: NPs with coordinated external premodification (*so-adj-(and)-adj- a/an-N*),

i.e. with adjectival predeterminers (external modifiers), both syndetically and asyndetically conjoined, and NPs with post-determiner, i.e. internal, modifiers (*so-adj-a/an-adj-N*). In four cases these types were combined and the strings had to be regarded as belonging to two types (and accordingly counted twice), which resulted in more instances of the structures than their actual occurrence figure is. The results are summarised in Table 1.

type	structure		combined types			total	%
			BC	BD	CD		
A	<i>so-adj-a/an-N</i>	572	—	—	—	572	89.2
B	<i>so-adj and adj-a/an-N</i>	32	2	1	—	35	5.5
C	<i>so-adv-adj-a/an-N</i>	7	2	—	1	10	1.6
D	<i>so-adj-a/an-adj-N</i>	22	—	1	1	24	3.7
Σ_1		633	4	2	2	641	100.0
Σ_2		633	4			637	

Note: Σ_1 – the sum of (pure and combined) type variants; Σ_2 – the sum of the actual occurrences of the structure

Table 1: Distribution of NPs with *so-adj* predeterminers in the *BNC* sample

As Table 1 shows, in 572 cases (89.2 per cent) the structure occurs in its basic form, *so-adj-a/an-N*, designated as **type A**. Instances of this majority type in the sample include the following examples chosen to illustrate their use in different syntactic positions (more on these below):

... it would be a shame if *so astute a performance* went unrevived
 Did they get *so bad a reception* at Worcester?
 Nature is *so complete a system*
 It therefore gives little hint of what makes its author *so extraordinary a figure*

... no one else could have told the main story in *so authoritative a fashion*

The façade is pierced by five doorways filled with bronze doors, some of which are remarkably new for *so ancient a building*

The skua is astonishingly agile for *so big a bird*

He could not have done so much in *so brief a time*

It is, at the very least, remarkable that the common law should be so schizophrenic concerning *so central a concept*

The modifier *so* could be even further intensified as in

The paradox does not present itself in *quite so acute a form* if a weaker version of the contextual approach is adopted

There are many other books, even if they are not in *quite so exclusive a category*, that are unlikely to be found in any form at all

Though Gilbard's was not *quite so irredeemable a hovel* as some have claimed, its shortcomings were plentiful enough.

The basic structure may also be extended into a comparative construction:

And if reason and experience could not settle *so basic a question as* this, how much less could they be relied upon to arbitrate on matters of faith?

Mensheviks in general adhered more strictly to the traditional Marxist assumption that in *so backward a country as* Russia the impending revolution would bring the bourgeoisie to power

Next, Table 1 shows that in addition to the basic type the sample contains 61 cases (some 11 per cent) of the other three types, B, C, and D. The most frequent among them is **type B** (*so-adj and adj-a/an-N*), with *so* followed by coordinated adjectival premodifiers. This conjoint type, which is nowhere mentioned in

the literature, accounts for more than half of the cases (5.5 per cent; 35 instances, including 3 mixed variants) other than the basic type, and displays a rich array of coordination variants:

so – *adj and adj* – *a/an* (2×):

A fearful thing for *so young and attractive a lady* to be trapped for life

Envy would not be *so strong and indefeasible an instinct*, unless it had an important function in the evolution

You will say we have every comfort necessary to render *so long and tedious a voyage* as agreeable as it can be.

so – *adj and so adj* – *a/an* (3×):

Maggie feels no doubt about that: *so small a word, so small and so necessary a word* is bound to survive, to slip through the net of destruction that she and Fenna – no, that she herself, alone – will loose on the cold sky tonight.

Though the very fact that it is *so traditional and so formal a poem* in the pastoral tradition, held in the tightness of all the conventions that it employs

... [the fleet] was found massed and in all respects perfectly prepared for *so sudden and so distant a call*.

so – *adj, so adj* – *a/an* (2×):

And the way it was delivered to him, *so neat, so innocent-seeming a package*.

... he was rather pleased that all this had been achieved out of *so peaceable, so unruffled a private existence*.

so – *adj and adv adj* – *a/an* (1×):

they shall use every effort to obtain services of some servant of Christ who may promote his cause among *so neglected and spiritually destitute a community*

so – adj, adj – *a/an* (1×):

And there are still people who can shout blasphemy or heresy and demand the same bishop's resignation when he makes *so self evident, commonsense a statement* as that the Resurrection can not be definitively 'proved'.

so – adj *and yet* adj – *a/an* (1×):

she had never seen a man with such brilliant dark eyes or *so saturnine and yet handsome a face*

so – adj *or* adj – *a/an* (1×):

in Gombrich's book the dramatic innovations of Caravaggio do well, but a distinguished painter, say Bonnard, who is not *so bold or challenging an artist* was omitted until additions were made to the text in 1971.

so – adj *or so* adj – *a/an* (1×):

Very few men have led *so versatile or so successful a life* as Peter Scott.

If anything the data on the conjoint type B alters the picture of NPs with adjectival predeterminers as presented in the standard grammar books. It shows that while the basic type A may be the most frequent, it is not structurally binding.

Type C, *so-adv-adj-a/an-N*, referred to in *CamGEL*, is the least represented in the whole *BNC* sample with just 10 instances (1.6 per cent), of which only 7 are pure type representatives:

Now, though *so politically convenient a view* is no longer tenable, no easy alternative presents itself.

The accuracy of *so relatively simple a 'brain'* surprised even those involved in building it.

All I can say is that at the time everything fitted together perfectly into *so glaringly obvious a pattern* that I was amazed I had never seen it before.

The remaining three instances are mixed type variants (see below). The low frequency of this structure suggests that it is even more stylistically marked than the basic A type.

Perhaps the most intriguing is the last **type D** which combines both external and internal modifier within the noun phrase. It is less common than the basic or conjoint types, still its frequency of 3.7 per cent (24 occurrences, including two mixed variants) makes it a phenomenon not entirely negligible:

Of course; *so famous a young lady* would make instant bookings. Never before had Ramsey run up against *so formidable a Christian opponent*, and never before been so forced to defend his biblical ideas.

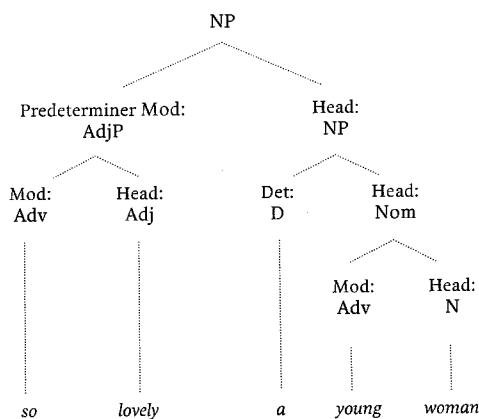
Yet this is no reason for ignoring what, taken as a whole process, is *so general a social fact*.

It is necessary to turn back to Ezra's childhood to find a key to that dire impatience which has led him into *so strange a spiritual home* as Fascist Italy.

Where today, one wonders, would a visiting celebrity be allowed *so unceremonial a ceremonial meal*, and one with so much character?

Never before had there been *so savage a fiscal squeeze*; not since the thirties had there been a comparable increase in unemployment, now approaching 3 million.

The interesting part is that the type combines two premodifying adjectives in two different syntactic positions, i.e. external and internal. Although the adjectives may be lexically related (*ceremonial-unceremonial*), their function in the NP is obviously different, with the external modifier adding an intensifying comment on the whole NP. The comparison with Czech highlights the fact that in English the difference in function must be reflected in a special surface structure while in Czech it is syntactically unremarkable: *so general a social fact* – tak obecný sociální fakt, *so strange a spiritual home* – tak podivný spirituální domov. The formal structure of this type can be represented by the following tree diagram.



Tree diagram 2

Finally, the four instances of combined variants include two instances of syndetic coordination of external modifiers (*so-adj and so-adv-adj*, *so-adv-adj* and *so-(adv-)adj*) form and one of

the asyndetic conjoint *so-adj, so-adj* combined with an internal modifier:

BC type

That the petitioners beg earnestly to press the consideration of these circumstances upon the Presbytery in the hope that they shall use every effort to obtain services of some servant of Christ who may promote his cause among *so neglected and spiritually destitute a community*, to which perhaps a parallel will not be found in the Highlands of Scotland.

BC type

But may I point out to you, Dr. Briant, that I for one – and I think it likely that the audience feels much as I do – find the material you are giving us in *so admirably concise and ordered a manner* is not as intelligible as it might be, since we are ordinary simple souls?

BD type

He was excited by the ferocious vitality and darting breadth of reference of the work, and secretly, personally, he was rather pleased that all this had been achieved out of *so peaceable, so unruffled a private existence*.

The fourth instance combines the *so-adv-adj* form with an internal modifier *filial*:

CD type

The energy generated from running upstairs and laughing with Stella in distant Florence flowed over into the impulse to ring, in turn, her own mother: a pointless act, but one that nevertheless in the context seemed pious, necessary, propitiatory, and a

gesture at least towards her sister, who bore *so much heavier a filial burden*, who would (in theory at least) be pleased to know that Liz had remembered.

Incidentally, the example with the comparative form of the adjective (*so much heavier*) only goes to underline the scaling nature of the adjectival predeterminer. Anyway, while external modifiers can apparently be easily coordinated, whether syndetically or asyndetically regardless of whether they are *so*-adj or *as*-adv-adj constituents, it is interesting that there was not a single occurrence of a conjoint type D, i.e., a structure with coordinated internal modifiers combining with an external modifier. This may be due to lack of data or to some intrinsic cognitive reasons. It is tempting to ask native speakers to try and produce such an example, but unfortunately structural potential and actual usage may be at odds. The additional sample yields one more example of the coordinated BC type:

How *so tame and so obviously harmless a Mephistopheles* could ruin the soul of Faust Dorian or indeed anybody's soul was a puzzle.

3.2 SYNTACTIC FUNCTIONS OF NPs WITH *SO*-ADJ PREDETERMINERS

The analysis of the syntactic functions of the noun phrases with *so*-adj predeterminers in the *BNC* sample was made to determine (a) the range of functions they can realize, and (b) their frequency. The distribution of syntactic function was ascertained for the whole sample and for each of the types separately.

type	O	Adv	Cs	S (there)	Mod	V-less	App	Co	total
A	219	134	108	56 (6)	45	6	3	1	572
B	9	11	7	5 (1)	2	1	—	—	35
C	2	5	—	2	1	—	—	—	10
D	10	6	3	4 (1)	—	1	—	—	24
total	240	156	118	67 (8)	48	8	3	1	641
%	37.4	24.3	18.4	10.5	7.5	1.2	0.5	0.2	100

Table 2: Distribution of syntactic functions of NPs with *so*-adj predeterminers in the sample

As Table 2 shows, NPs with *so*-adj predeterminers do not seem to be restricted in the scope of syntactic functions they can fulfil. All the types display the same tendency as far as the order and frequency of functions are concerned, only when the number of items in a type is too low (type C) does this tendency disappear. Conversely, the most numerous type A appears in more functions than the remaining types.

The most frequent function, **Object**, accounting for a third of the items (37.4 per cent), subsumes different kinds of object, direct object with both transitive and ditransitive verbs, and prepositional object:

Why should this make *so great a difference*?

I have never seen *so active an audience*.

She'd never ridden *so big a horse* as Sultan.

That he satisfied *so impatient and fastidious a monarch* for so long says much for his efficiency

Who but Ashton would have thought of giving this country yokel *so delicate a movement*?

How could a man in his position take advantage of *so vulnerable a creature* as Melanie Gandell?

Nobody dreamed of *so swift a break*.

There are several cases when the NP acted as object of an adjective and these are also subsumed under the category Object:

But China, Taiwan and the ASEAN countries ... are leery about *so exclusive a grouping*.

Was it worth *so great a violation* to do me such a little hurt?

The second most frequent function is that of **Adverbial** (24.3 per cent). The function is realized by prepositional phrases of which the NPs are part. There seems to be no restriction on the semantic class of adverbials that can be expressed by PPs including NPs with adjectival predeterminers:

He could not have done so much in *so brief a time*.

I hate to think of him dead and in *so horrid a way*.

... he had been unable to throw his voice over *so large an assembly*.

Was her waist just a shade too stiff for *so massive a skirt*?

Carried by *so small a man*, the camera's lens would often be no higher from the ground than a child's eye.

Break off the match because of *so small a thing*?

I think we were all pleased to lose the scoundrel at *so small a price*.

The third most frequent function is that of **Subject Complement** (18.4 per cent). The complement was realized mostly by NPs with *so*-adj predeterminers alone, in only a few instances by a PP including an NP with adjectival predeterminer:

Is it *so dreadful a secret* that you can't tell me?

'I am not *so easy a conquest*!' she stormed.

Third generation copies of standard-format originals are generally *so poor a quality* as to be unacceptable.

The fourth most frequent function is **Subject** (10.5 per cent). Although the NPs in subject position are found in the main clause, there is a distinct tendency for them to appear in subclauses.

Rarely has *so important a constitutional bill* staggered towards enactment so inelegantly.

Manifestly *so vast a body* does not collapse overnight and much of the decline can be masked for decades.

It is a little disappointing that *so handsome a book* offers so breathless a review of the subject.

He pulled her to her feet, marvelling that *so slight a creature* could have put up such a fight

This group also subsumes 16 cases (almost a quarter of the subject group) where the NP functions as the postposed or notional subject proper of the *there* sentence:

Never has there been *so great a need* for the talented people universities can provide and nurture

... there could never be *so dead a reckoning* that the final moment could be named with certainty.

The **Modifier** function (7.5 per cent) is mostly implemented by NPs with adjectival predeterminer functioning as part of a post-modifying prepositional phrase. In most cases the preposition was *of*, though occasionally other prepositions can be found:

A subdivision of *so large a province* may well have seemed desirable in purely pastoral terms.

Richard was the youngest man ever to be made Head of *so large a school*.

Even a full house would be piffling for a town with *so vast a drawing area*.

It was a big job for *so small a number of men*.

Interesting is the appearance of three cases of **Apposition** and one of **Object Complement**:

If he die on us, *so gallant a man*, I'll never forgive myself.

Roy Jenkins, usually *so percipient an interpreter* of the public mood, became caricatured in popular legend as the libertarian Home Secretary who wanted to insulate policemen in Panda cars. His cautious and methodical ways, once *so valuable a buffer* to Richard's impetuosity, now become more and more a cause of annoyance.

It therefore gives little hint of what makes its author *so extraordinary a figure*.

Finally, the NPs appear eight times in verbless clauses:

Why, on *so hot a day*?

With *so lovely a face*?

Assuming that the distribution of syntactic functions is to some extent affected by the specific properties of the NP with *so-adj* predeterminer, what is the distribution indicative of? More than half of the items (55.8 per cent) are O and Cs, i.e. from the FSP point of view positions typical of rhematic function. If adverbial function (24.3 per cent) is added, of which the same is generally true, and the rhematic subjects proper in existential sentences, more than 80 per cent of the NPs with adjectival predeterminer are concentrated in the rhematic part of the sentence. Conversely, less than one tenth consists of NPs

in subject position which is typically thematic. On the whole it looks as if NPs with adjectival predeterminers including the intensifier *so* are predisposed to rhematic function.

3.3 Semantics of the pre- and postdeterminer AdjP

The degree adverb *so* in the external modifier preceding an adjective (or an adverb) is an intensifier, a scaling-up device, which naturally requires the adjective (or adverb) to be one of gradable quality. Typical examples are *important, famous, good, improbable, amazing, simple, complex, admirably, relatively, spiritually, conspicuously*, etc. However, even adjectives of relation can appear after *so*, due to their recategorization as gradable quality adjectives: *so Mediterranean a city, so northerly a wine*, etc. An interesting example of this is *so unceremonial a ceremonial meal*.

The internal premodifier following the indefinite article has no such restrictions, it can be both an adjective of quality (*so lovely a young woman, so profound a mystical experience*) or one of relation (*so marginal a Cabinet post, so profitable a five nations championship, so improbable a research programme*).

4 THE EMERGENT PICTURE

Although the cases such as *so wide a divergence* are treated in grammar books as canonical, the truth is that NPs with *so*-adj predeterminers are surprisingly varied and versatile. The range of the variant structures appearing in the sample is summed up by the following list:

so – adj – a/an – N	so harsh a place, so sure a foundation
adv – so – adj – a/an – N	quite so wide a pool
so – adj, adj – a/an – N	so self evident, commonsense a statement as that
so – adj – and – adj- a/an – N	so comfortable and civilised an institution
so – adj – and so – adj – a/an – N	so small and so necessary a word
so – adj – and yet – adj – a/an – N	so saturnine and yet handsome a face
so – adj – or – adj – a/an – N	so bold or challenging an artist
so – adj – or so – adj – a/an – N	so versatile or so successful a life
so – adj – and – adv – adj – a/an – N	so central and apparently innocuous a feature
so – adj – and – so – adv – adj – a/an – N	so tame and so obviously harmless a Mephistopheles
so – adj – a/an – adj -N	so vivid a Victorian hymn, so improbable a research programme
so – adj, so – adj – a/an – adj – N	so peaceable, so unruffled a private existence
so – adv – adj – a/an – N	so overtly romantic an opera
so – adv – adj – and – adj – a/an – N	so admirably concise and ordered a manner
so – adv – adj (comp) a/an – adj – N	so much heavier a filial burden

To this list can be added some special cases such as NPs whose head is a nominal proform *one* and a proper name:

Indeed, I did not deserve *so kind a one*, but by this time you have received my last.

Would *so furtive and nervous an Antonio* habitually spit on this svelte, strong chap in his Jermyn Street shirts

or coordination of two NPs with *so-adj* predeterminers:

Even with *so precise a style* and *so amiable a personality* as Baker's, one feels the need for other voices.

At this point, we may take a closer look at the picture of NPs with *so-adj* predeterminers as it emerges from the data. We started with what we called the basic type (*so complicated a problem*) which is the only one mentioned in the literature. However, the analysis revealed that there is another, important variant, *so formidable a Christian opponent*. What this variant shows is that NPs with *so-adj* predeterminers have not one but two slots for AdjP modifiers, one in predeterminer and the other in postdeterminer position (see Tree diagram 2 above). They are called here external and internal modifiers after *CamGEL*. The sample statistics shows that the simultaneous occurrence of predeterminer and postdeterminer modifiers in an NP is relatively rare (3.7 per cent), in other words if the predeterminer slot is filled, the postdeterminer one tends to be unoccupied. This, however, makes no difference to the fact that the structure does have potentially two AdjP modifier slots (with the adjective in the first one preceded by *so*); it only shows that the two modifiers are relatively independent of each other, i.e., one or the other or both can be realized.

The two AdjP modifiers are syntactically separate, which is marked by the presence of a determiner (obligatorily the indefinite article) between them. They cannot be regarded as coordinated, but each slot can be filled by conjoined AdjPs.

Interestingly enough, the data suggests that while the predeterminer modifier can be realized by coordinated adjectives regardless of whether the postdeterminer slot is empty or filled (cf. *so remote and irrelevant a place, so peaceable, so unruffled a private existence*), there is not a single instance of an NP with a predeterminer modifier and coordination in the postdeterminer slot in the *BNC* sample or in the additional sample.

The obvious question to ask is where the predeterminer modifier comes from. The possible answer is that it may have started as a *so*-adj postmodifier associated with several types of constructions, namely *a man so difficult to please; a place so primitive that it had no lavatories; a use so unintensive as to approach vacancy*. Each of them allows an alternative construction in which this postmodifier is separated and shifted before the head noun. However, inasmuch as the intensifier *so* cannot be preceded by an article (unless it has itself become part of a complex adjective, *a so-so joke, a so-far ungrateful nation*), an adjective modified by *so* cannot follow the article and the only place for it is outside the whole NP: *so difficult a man to please; so primitive a place that it had no lavatories; so unintensive a use as to approach vacancy*. The indefinite article between the two pre-head modifier slots marks the borderline between them and is a reminder that they started as two positionally different kinds of modifier.

There are many other questions, of course. Why should the postmodifier be shifted to predeterminer position in the first place? Why is the indefinite article obligatory in these two-slot NPs? Why can the external modifier be extended through coordination while the internal one apparently cannot? To answer the first question we must ask: what is the difference between *a man so difficult to please* and *so difficult a man to please*? If anything, the latter form appears to be stylistically marked and lends a certain novelty to the NP phrase; also, the

rearrangement of the phrasal elements is almost inevitably accompanied by a different information structure, etc. A look at the BNC sample shows that most of the *so*-adj predeterminers are not part of any of the above post-head constructions. We may hypothesise that once the alternative constructions with AdjPs in the predeterminer slot came into use it was a small step for these AdjPs to be used on their own as a handy stylistic device. Although it is probably true that they are generally used in formal contexts, the sample examples suggest that adjectival predeterminers are used extensively in newspapers and in indirect speech, i.e. not in strictly literary contexts.

The reason why the indefinite article is obligatory in these two-slot premodification NPs seems to be that both the predeterminer AdjP with the intensifying *so* (with prominent intonation) and the indefinite article share a rhematising potential, in other words *so* with rhematising function is semantically discordant with the definite article. The impossibility of the zero article (with plural nouns), on the other hand, may be accounted for by the fact that the absence of a formal determiner removes the boundary between the two slots, the important difference between external and internal modifier. If the external modifier is formally indistinguishable from the internal modifier, then it can be expected to behave as one. Accordingly, if the AdjP *so primitive* were forced into the position of an internal modifier (replacing *primitive*), as in *so primitive places*, the singular form would have to be either *a so primitive place* or *so a primitive place*, which is prohibited by *so*, hence avoided in usage. Finally, the reason for why we find coordinated adjectives in predeterminer position and only single adjectives in NPs (when combined with predeterminer modifiers) in the sample may be that if the focus in the NP is on the predeterminer AdjP due to the presence of intensifying *so*, then the multiplication of adjectives in the postdeterminer position is distracting and undesirable.

5 CONCLUSION

The analysis of the *BNC* sample and additional examples has brought to light the existence of many other variants over and above the basic type *so complicated a matter* traditionally mentioned in the literature. Although the results indicate that the basic type is by far the most common, there are two interesting findings: adjectives in the predeterminer position may be variously coordinated (both syndetically and asyndetically) and the *so*-adj predeterminer (external modifier) may combine with a postdeterminer adjective (internal modifier), e.g. *so profound a mystical experience*. Syntactic analysis shows that NPs with *so*-adj predeterminers are most frequent in object, adverbial and subject complement positions, i.e. positions typically rhematic. This finding is in keeping with the potentially rhematizing nature of the intensifying *so* and the indefinite article.

The peculiar structure of these NPs which includes two premodifiers (external and internal) with the two slots formally separated by the indefinite article is tentatively interpreted as having resulted from the AdjP-N-AdjP phrase. While the post-head position of the second AdjP was originally due mostly to its complementation, these post-head AdjP constructions which permit the separation of the *so*-adj from the complementation may have been the starting-point for the *so*-adj phrase becoming ultimately independent and firmly established in pre-head position as a useful stylistic device. It is possible now to modify Jespersen's observation quoted above: the indefinite article indeed naturally precedes an adjective unless it functions not as an internal modifier but as an external modifier in pre-head position. In this context, the indefinite article succeeding the *so*-adj string is not an exception, but a logical arrangement.

Obviously, the emergence of *so*-adj predeterminers calls for a diachronic study to find out when and how the structure began. It also remains to be seen whether and how much of what applies to *so*-adj predeterminers is true of the adjectival predeterminers preceded by other items, such as *too*. The *so*-adj predeterminer could also be analysed as a special case of an information-packaging construction.

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