

SATURDAY, 11 JULY 2009

On being typical(ly)

A correspondent writes from Germany to say that he is often corrected for saying *typical German* (for *typisch Deutsch*). He has been advised to say *a typical German* or *typically German*, but he feels that his version is all right. What do I think?

The use of the article isn't relevant here, as that depends on whether the noun is countable or not.

That's a typical English tree
That's a typically English tree.

That's typical English weather.
That's typically English weather.

These examples display a very slight difference in meaning: *typical* means simply 'characteristic of', whereas the adverbial force of *typically* highlights the way of behaving. (The difference is more marked with some other pairs, such as *basic/basically*, *happy/happily*.)

There's no usage issue here. An issue arises only when *English* (or other such nouns) is made the head of the noun phrase. Normally we wouldn't find two adjectives in predicative position without modification. If we start with *That's tasty home-made cake*, we wouldn't normally say (in a single intonation contour) *That's tasty home-made*, but something like *That's tasty and home-made*.

But this has happened with the type of example which motivated this post, where we find both:

That's typically English.
That's typical English.

Typical has taken on an adverbial role, and this is what makes some people uncomfortable. They like adjectives to stay adjectives, so they object when people say *It's looking good*, *Drive slow*, and suchlike. It's part of the prescriptive tradition in English.

But the fact is that both constructions are common. The present-day usage has probably been reinforced by frequency. Constructions such as *typical English/German* are actually three times as common as those with *typically*, as a quick Google search will confirm.

So we now have a pair of sentences which mean the same thing. And when this happens, a stylistic difference is bound to emerge. *Typical* is more informal than *typically*. I can imagine a curator in an art gallery stopping in front of a picture

and saying *That's typically Dutch* - less likely, *That's typical Dutch*. But I wouldn't be at all surprised to hear the latter from a group of people chatting about the picture.

We can get a stronger sense of the informality if we change the example. *That's typically Rembrandt* is the sort of thing one would say about a picture. *That's typical Rembrandt* might be heard after someone told a story about his naughty behaviour. So I think my German correspondent needs to look to the context before deciding whether to say or write *typical German* or not.