SHWNG Noun Phrases, and How They Got That Way

In his Universal 20, Greenberg (1966) claims that "When any or all of the items (demonstrative, numeral, and descriptive adjective) precede the noun, they are always found in that order. If they follow, the order is either the same or its exact opposite." Though this formulation seems to ban the order Noun Adjective Demonstrative(/Determiner) Numeral(/Quantifier), or NADQ, it is in fact attested in the world's languages, though rarely. Cinque (2005) finds only nine clear examples in his survey of the typological literature; Dryer (2018), in a larger sample of 576 languages, finds 36 examples, with an areal cluster in and around New Guinea.

This talk adds two additional New Guinea languages to the list, and accounts for how such a disprefered word order arose in these cases. Wamesa, a South Halmahera-West New Guinea (Austronesian) language of West Papua, Indonesia, and its cousin Dusner, both show NADQ ordering in their noun phrases. In Wamesa (Gasser 2014), the pattern is clear:

(1) *anggadi pimasa=pa muandu*
    coconut big=DET   two
    'the two big coconuts'

Dusner is highly underdocumented, with only a 55-page sketch grammar by Dalrymple & Mofu (2012), and only ∼3 elderly speakers remaining. No examples in exist in that sketch of an NP with all three modifying components present, but taken together, the examples in (2) (NDQ) and (3) (NAD) suggest that NADQ order is present in this language as well.

(2) *manvetatu   ya   nuru*   (3) *nap=a   romansar ya*
    bird.of.paradise DET.3SG two   dog=FILL big   DET.3SG
    'two birds of paradise'   'the big dog'

Wamesa and Dusner do not share this word order by common descent. Wamesa belongs to the Yapen subgroup while Dusner is Biakic; each is the only (known) NADQ language in their group, and there is no evidence of NADQ in a common ancestor. In Wamesa, NADQ appears to have arisen from reanalysis of number agreement marked as a suffix on the determiner, a case of degrammaticalization. When no overt numeral is present in a Wamesa NP, the determiner agrees with the noun in number and animacy; when a numeral is present, agreement may not occur. The number agreement suffix resembled a numeral, particularly in the dual and trial, and was reanalyzed as such, yielding the present pattern. Evidence from closely related NAQD languages, such as Ambai (Silzer 1983), shows what I claim was the earlier state. (4) uses a numeral and no agreement, while (5) uses determiner agreement without a numeral.

(4) *wara-keka damirai bo-**ru**   fo-∅*   (5) *Wiwin fo-**suru**   (uminoki).*
    hand-digit painful INAN-two DET   woman DET-DUAL (3DU.sit)
    'his two sore fingers'   'The two women (sat down).'

Dusner, however, cannot have inherited its word order in this way; as evidenced in part by the co-occurrence of determiner agreement with numerals. Instead, Dusner appears to have borrowed the pattern from Wamesa. The traditional Dusner-speaking territory is surrounded by Wamesa area, and bilingualism was common; extensive lexical borrowing between the two languages – usually Wamesa to Dusner – has been documented. This then is a case of grammatical change via intense long-term language contact. (It is worth noting that Warembori, a more distant relative within SHWNG, appears to have independently innovated NADQ order as well.)