

snippets

Issue 37 - December 2019
Special issue in honor of Uli Sauerland

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Vagueness and context-sensitivity of absolute gradable adjectives

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7358/snip-2019-037-schu>

Absolute gradable adjectives such as *full* are typically considered to be context-invariant due to their underlying scale structure making available an endpoint. However, examples (1) and (2) differ with respect to the degree of fullness they convey:

- (1) Uli clinked his full glass of champagne to get everyone's attention.
- (2) Uli clinked his full glass of whiskey to get everyone's attention.

Sauerland and Stateva (2011) argue for a dualistic view of vagueness and distinguish between scalar and epistemic vagueness. They further propose that scalar vagueness relies on a particular contextual parameter, the granularity function. However, certain context effects as in (1) and (2) cannot be accounted for on the basis of the degree of granularity but rely on a context-dependent threshold triggered by the entity that the scalar adjective predicates over.

Absolute gradable adjectives are associated with an endpoint that their scale structure provides (3), while relative gradable adjectives (e.g., *tall*) are sensitive to an open scale that requires a context-dependent threshold (or degree) d that depends on a standard of comparison s (4) (Rotstein and Winter 2004, Kennedy and McNally 2005; inter alia).

- (3) $\llbracket_{pos}full\rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d[d = \text{endpoint}(full) \wedge \llbracket full\rrbracket(d)(x)]$
- (4) $\llbracket_{pos}tall\rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d[d \geq s(tall) \wedge \llbracket tall\rrbracket(d)(x)]$

In contrast to (3), a glass of whiskey (2) is considered *full* when it contains 4 cl. Thus, the threshold for the gradable property *full* in the whiskey-glass context is around 30%, whereas the context-invariant threshold is 100%. Absolute adjectives may thus deviate from their endpoint threshold (5).

- (5) $\llbracket_{pos}full\rrbracket [\text{for a whiskey-glass}] = \lambda x. \exists d \left[\begin{array}{l} d \geq s(\lambda y : \text{whiskey-glass}(y).full(y)) \\ \wedge \llbracket full\rrbracket(d)(x) \end{array} \right]$

In this respect, the functions of absolute (5) and relative adjectives (4) are very similar and may both need access to a contextually salient standard of comparison. The role of context-sensitivity however varies between relative and absolute adjectives. Relative adjectives indispensably require contextual import for the calculation of the threshold; absolute adjectives come with an endpoint that can be adjusted on the basis of contextual information. This suggests that although both types of scalar adjectives may rely on context, they should still differ in their underlying operations. Kennedy (2007) proposes that the endpoint of *full* represents a conventional threshold, but that pragmatic processes allow for scalar flexibility. McNally (2011) argues that absolute adjectives are subject to a rule that involves a maximum or conventional endpoint, while relative adjectives

rely on more elaborate reasoning about a comparison class. Lassiter and Goodman (2013) suggest that absolute adjectives are less vague than relative adjectives due to different priors. Experimental data from real-time processing is thus needed to determine the underlying dynamics.

In a first step, it should be shown that the threshold shifts from context to context by testing a larger sample of adjectives with varying objects (previous research has confined itself to a limited number of adjectives, e.g., Syrett et al. 2009, McNabb 2012 and Aparicio et al. 2015). In a rating task, participants evaluate the goodness of fit of adjectives and a set of images (e.g., whiskey-glasses with different degrees of fullness). Vagueness should be reflected in s-shaped proportion curves (Qing and Franke 2014). In a second step, the mechanisms involved in the comprehension of absolute and relative gradable adjectives should be assessed during real-time processing. Using event-related brain potentials, the cognitive response to images that deviate from an adjective's threshold can be recorded (and should be reflected in varying N400-amplitudes) to assess the impact of thresholds on adjective processing. This will indicate potential differences in the interpretation of the two types of adjectives or whether a uniform account of scalar vagueness should be maintained.

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This research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), project no. 254822891, within the Priority Program SPP 1727 “XPrag.de: New Pragmatic Theories based on Experimental Evidence.”

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