

Absolute Adjectives and their modifiers

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We normally think that the truth value of sentences with vague adjectives such as 'John is tall' depends on, e.g., how John compares to a contextually determined set of entities – the comparison class. In a joint work with Assaf Toledo, we argue that absolute adjectives too are interpreted relative to a context dependent comparison class (cf., van Rooij 2009), but the method for determining it is different. For absolute adjectives, the comparison class is the set of temporal stages (or counterparts) of the entity the adjective is predicated of; e.g., in 'the glass is full', we compare the current state to how full the glass is or could be in other circumstances that we consider 'normal'. This observation solves a number of puzzles from the literature on scale structure theory. Our analysis eats the cake and has it too – on the one hand, it captures contextual effects (e.g., a full glass of wine need not be as full as a full glass of tea); on the other hand, it captures the apparent context insensitivity of absolute adjectives, because the way their argument normally is highly restricts their interpretation, providing a clear membership standard.

Moreover, we hypothesized that in the positive construction adjectives that encode highly variable – 'stage level' – properties of entities (dirt, moist, openness, etc.) give rise to an interpretation based on sets of temporal stages of those entities. By contrast adjectives that encode relatively stable – 'individual level' – properties of entities (height; weight; potential speed, etc.), give rise to comparison classes consisting of other entities.

In addition, following Klein's (1980) analysis of relative modifiers like *very*, I proposed to analyze absolute modifiers too – including minimizers as in *slightly full* and maximizers as in *completely full* – as setting the comparison class to be the adjective denotation. On this analysis, they refer to the minimal and maximal elements in this set, not in the entire scale – e.g., the least full and fullest among the full entities, respectively (therefore, e.g., *slightly full* => *full*.) Furthermore, following Lewis (1979) and in analogy with Krifka's (2002, 2007) approach to numerals and rounding, I proposed that modifiers introduce a shift to scales of finer granularity and, therefore, higher standards of precision. Hence, the denotation of *dirty/ full* consists of minimally dirty/ maximally full entities presupposing a default standard of precision (coarse granularity level); e.g., few grains of dust or few missing drops in a full glass are ignorable. However, with modifiers, we zoom into the denotation and observe differences we previously ignored. Thus, the denotation of *slightly dirty/ completely full* consists of minimally dirty/ maximally full entities presupposing finer granularity – a pedantic standard of precision – every dust grain and every missing drop counts.

These hypotheses have led to extensive experimentation (partly together with Natalia Zevakhina, Moscow), with implications in the context of study of scale structure, granularity, and implicatures. The talk will present an overview of this work.