

# The Absolute-Relative Distinction in Adjectives

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## 1 Introduction

- (1) *Absolute/Bounded adjectives*
  - a. The door is open/closed.
  - b. The rod is straight/bent.
  - c. The bottle is empty/full.
- (2) *Relative/Unbounded adjectives*
  - a. Max is tall/short.
  - b. The book is good/bad.
  - c. Cindy is happy/sad.

Claims:

- ▷ The absolute/relative distinction is contextual. It does not belong inherently to the adjective (scale). Instead, it depends on the noun that the adjective is predicated of.
- ▷ This fact is incompatible with the compositional approach to the semantics of gradable adjectives as developed by Kennedy and McNally (2005) and Kennedy (2007).

## 2 Aspects of the absolute-relative distinction

### 2.1 Relative adjectives are vague

#### 2.1.1 Contextual variability in truth conditions

- ▷ In Context 1, (3) is true, in Context 2 it is false.
  - (3) The coffee in Rome is expensive.
  - (4)
    - a. Context 1: coffee in Naples, coffee in Milan, coffee in Bari, coffee in Venice, coffee in Palermo
    - b. Context 2: coffee in New York, coffee in Paris, coffee in Moscow, coffee in Tokyo, coffee in London
- ▷ The standard of comparison may be made explicit (McNally 2011):
  - (5)
    - a. Compared to her friend Andrea, Marta is tall.
    - b. Marta is tall for an 11-year-old.
    - c. Marta is taller than Andrea.
- ▷ The interpretation of absolute adjectives is not contextually variable.
  - (6)
    - a. The door is closed.
    - b. The door is not closed.
- ▷ A standard of comparison cannot be added with absolute adjectives:
  - (7)
    - a. ??Compared to the front door, the back door is closed.
    - b. ??My front door is closed for a front door.
    - c. ??The front door is more closed than the back door.

#### 2.1.2 Unclear cases

- (8)
  - a. Organic Kona: \$20/pound
  - b. Swell Start Blend: \$9.25/pound
  - c. Mud Blend: \$1.50/pound
- (9) The Swell Start Blend is expensive.

### 2.1.3 The Sorites paradox

- (10) *The Paradox of the Heap*  
*Premise 1:* A single grain of sand does not make a heap  
*Premise 2:* If  $n$  grains of sand do not make a heap, then  $(n + 1)$  grains of sand do not make a heap  
*Conclusion:* A million grains of sand do not form a heap.
- (11) *Relative Adjectives*  
*Premise 1:* A \$5 cup of coffee is expensive.  
*Premise 2:* Any cup of coffee that costs 1 cent less than an expensive one is expensive.  
*Conclusion:* Therefore, any cup of coffee is expensive.
- (12) *Absolute Adjectives*  
*Premise 1:* This door is closed.  
*Premise 2:* Any door that is 1 mm less closed than this door is closed.  
*Conclusion:* Therefore, any door is closed.

## 2.2 Degree modifiers

- (13) a. *Absolute (proportional) modifiers:*  
completely, absolutely, totally, mostly, almost, half (full, closed, invisible)  
b. *Relative modifiers:*  
very, terribly, fairly (long, expensive, old, good)

## 2.3 Nonverbal modal complements in Dutch

▷ Barbiers (1995):

- (14) a. De trossen mogen los.  
The hawsers may loose  
'The hawsers may be released.'  
b. De fles moet leeg.  
The bottle must empty  
'The bottle must be emptied.'  
c. Het raam kan open.  
The window can open  
'The window can be opened.'
- (15) a. \*Het kantoor moet groot.  
The office must big  
'The office must be made big.'  
b. \*Die auto kan snel/traag.  
That car can fast/slow  
'That car can drive fast/slow.'  
c. \*De storm mag hevig.  
The storm may heavy

‘The storm may be made heavy.’

## 2.4 Resultatives

Vanden Wyngaerd (2001), Wechsler (2005):

- (16) a. Het drukke verkeer heeft de sporen \*diep/plat gereden.  
 ‘Heavy traffic drove the tracks deep/flat.’  
 b. Van zong zich \*slaperig/bewusteloos.  
 ‘Van sang himself sleepy/unconscious.’

## 2.5 Inchoative auxiliary choice

▷ Relative adjectives:

- (17) a. Marie is groot geworden/\*geraakt.  
 ‘Marie has become tall.’  
 b. Het kind is ziek geworden/\*geraakt.  
 ‘The child has become ill.’

▷ Absolute adjectives:

- (18) a. De deur is open/dicht \*geworden/geraakt.  
 ‘The door has become open/closed.’  
 b. Het glas is leeg/vol \*geworden/geraakt.  
 ‘The glass has become empty/full.’

# 3 The absolute-relative distinction is contextual

## 3.1 Type of comparison class

▷ The absolute relative distinction reduces to different types of comparison classes (Toledo and Sassoon 2011):

- (19) a. Relative adjectives: other individuals (e.g. Mary is tall)  
 b. Absolute adjectives: a counterpart set, i.e. different stages of the same individual (e.g. The glass is full)

▷ The basis for determining a comparison class in turn rests on the individual of which the adjective is predicated.

- (20) Experiment by Syrett et al. (2010): Two glasses of unequal height and fullness.  
 a. Hand me the tall one: ok  
 b. Hand me the full one: subject cannot comply

### 3.2 Absoluteness is in the object

- ▷ Absolute/Relative is not in the adjective, but in the thing the adjective is predicated of.
  - ▷ Consider EMPTY: (21b) shows all the properties of vagueness: dependence upon a contextual standard, unclear cases, susceptibility to the Sorites paradox.
- (21) a. The glass is half/almost/completely empty.  
b. My life has been very/terribly/fairly empty.
- ▷ LOS ‘loose’
- (22) a. De trossen zijn helemaal/\*?erg los.  
The hawsers are completely/very loose.  
‘The hawsers are completely released.’  
b. De moraal is er erg/\*helemaal los.  
The morals are there very/completely loose.  
‘Morals are very loose there.’
- ▷ OPEN:
- (23) a. The window is completely/half/almost open.  
b. \*The window is very/terribly/fairly open.
- (24) a. a ?completely/\*?half/??almost open attitude  
b. a very/terribly/fairly open attitude
- ▷ With a different choice of subject, both *los* ‘loose’ and *open* ‘open’ and are also much worse as a nonverbal modal complement:
- (25) a. ?\*De presentatiestijl voor dit programma moet los.  
the presentation.style for this programme must loose  
‘The presentation style for this show needs to be relaxed.’  
b. ?\*Zijn houding moet open.  
His attitude must open.  
‘His attitude must be open.’
- ▷ British National Corpus
- ▷ *very open*: 49 hits.
- (26) a. a very open person/process/view/weave texture/landscape/ texture/intelligence/capital market system/mind  
b. very open people/questions/gravel flushes
- ▷ *almost open*: 4 hits
  - ▷ *half open*: 35 hits:
- (27) door, gate, mouth, eyes, lid, top, shirt, wings, flaps

▷ *completely open*: 21 hits:

- (28) a completely open person/window/road/market/platform/mind/situation/way/product range

▷ HARD 'hard'

- (29) a. De cement is bijna hard.  
'The cement is almost hard.'  
b. Hun houding tegenover geweld is erg hard.  
'Their attitude towards violence is very tough.'
- (30) a. Voor we verder kunnen werken, moet de cement eerst hard.  
before we further can work must the cement first hard  
'Before we can go on working, the cement must first be hard.'  
b. \*De houding van de politie moet hard.  
the attitude of the police must hard  
'Police attitude must be tough.'

▷ WET-DRY

- (31) a. a very/fairly wet climate  
b. a half/completely wet towel
- (32) a. This region of the country is very dry.  
b. The glasses are completely dry.

### 3.3 Quantity interpretations

▷ Rather than involving a scale of ordered degrees, the adjective can be true of more or less parts of the subject.

- (33) a. ??Outside it's completely hot. (Kennedy and McNally 2005, 365)  
b. The baby's face is completely hot.
- (34) a. ??Milk is completely white.  
b. His suit was completely white.
- (35) a. The meat is half cooked.  
b. The crops are partially frozen.
- (36) a. Het meisje is (\*?half) stil. (M. De Belder, p.c.)  
the girl is half silent.  
b. De zaal is half stil.  
the room is half silent  
'Half of the room (i.e. audience) is quiet.'
- (37) a. \*?Het meisje moet helemaal stil.  
the girl must completely silent.  
'The girl must be completely quiet.'  
b. De zaal moet helemaal stil.  
the room must completely silent.

‘The room must be completely quiet.’

### 3.4 Quantity interpretations with *completely*

▷ *Completely* is quite common with gradable adjectives (example from Kennedy and McNally 1999, n1 ).

- (38) a. #The line is completely straight, but it could be straighter. (absolute)  
 b. I’m completely uninterested in finances, but Bob is even less interested. (relative)

▷ Does this contrast suggest that *completely* sometimes act as a modifier of relative adjectives, comparable to *very*?

→ No, this is another case of a quantity interpretation.

- (39) For a student who has just moved here, she is very familiar with the class routines and her teachers’ expectations. In fact, she’s completely familiar with them. (McNally 2011)

- (40) a. My analysis is very/completely different from yours.  
 b. My analysis is very/completely similar to yours.

▷ Cases like (40) with *completely* involve quantity readings: *completely different* means *different in all respects*.

### 3.5 Contextual variability in absolute adjectives

▷ In a restaurant context, a glass filled to no more than half its capacity can count as a full wine glass (McNally 2011).

- (41) This wine glass is full

- (42) a. Compared to my wine glass, your wine glass is full.  
 b. My wine glass is full for a wine glass.  
 c. My wine glass is fuller than your wine glass.

- (43) *Premise 1*: This wine glass is full.  
*Premise 2*: Any wine glass that is 1 ml less filled than this wine glass is full.  
*Conclusion*: Therefore, any wine glass is full.

- (44) My bath is (very) full.

- (45) a. For a Friday, the dentist’s schedule is very full. (McNally 2011)  
 b. The dentist’s schedule is completely full.

- (46) The theatre is empty tonight.

## 4 Degree Semantics

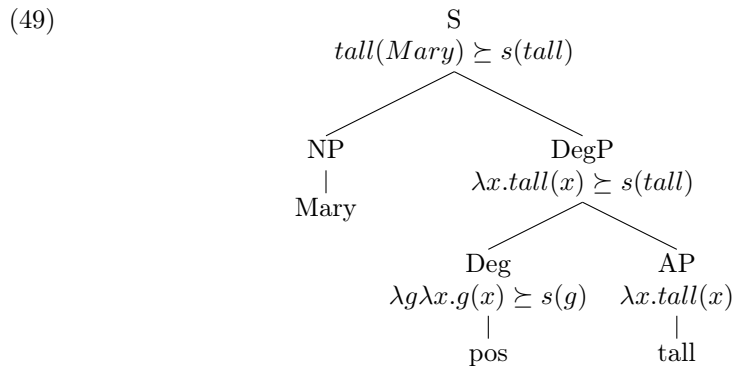
▷ The following sentence is not necessarily true (Kamp 1975), although its predicate logical representation is:

- (47) a. Every big ant is big.  
 b.  $(\forall x)((A(x) \& B(x)) \rightarrow B(x))$

- ▷ Solution: degree semantics (Bartsch and Venneman 1972, Cresswell, 1976, Kennedy, 1999, Kennedy and McNally 2005, Kennedy 2007).  
 ▷ Gradable adjectives are not predicates (of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ ), but they denote functions from individuals to ordered sets of degrees (type  $\langle e, d \rangle$ )

- (48)  $\llbracket \text{tall}(\text{Mary}) \rrbracket = 1.79\text{m}$

- ▷ The denotation type  $\langle e, d \rangle$  is converted into a property (i.e. a function from individuals to truth values) via degree morphology, which is of the type  $\langle \langle e, d \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ .  
 ▷ Positive degree morphology also introduces a standard value  $s$ . Open scales have a relative standard, i.e. the standard is determined relative to a contextually determined comparison class.



- ▷ ‘The degree to which Mary is tall is equal to or exceeds the standard degree of tallness’  
 ▷ With absolute adjectives, the analysis is the same, except that the standard values for closed scales are minimal or maximal degrees, referring to the maximum or the minimum of the scale (depending on the adjective).  
 ▷ The type of an adjective (absolute or relative) is a lexically encoded property of the adjective rather than in the noun.  
 ▷ Therefore, the analysis fails to account for the observation that scale type is dependent on the adjective’s subject.



## 5 Conclusion

- ▷ The absolute/relative distinction is contextual.
- ▷ This fact is incompatible with degree semantics.

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