

Interpreting Gradable Adjectives in Context: Domain Distribution vs. Scalar Representation

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Gradable adjectives denote properties that are relativized to context dependent thresholds of application: how long an object must be in order to count as long in a context of utterance depends on what the threshold is. In the typical case, thresholds are uncertain, a feature that distinguishes them from other kinds of contextual parameters. Threshold uncertainty has played a prominent role in discussions of vagueness in philosophy of language, but there has been relatively little attention to this feature of adjective meaning in linguistic semantics and pragmatics, and correspondingly little attention to a fundamental question about communication with gradable adjectives: what are the principles that govern decisions about threshold values in context, and so determine the communicative content of gradable adjectives in a speech situation? We consider two recent answers to this question, which differ in the role that formal properties of adjective meaning play in determining threshold values. On one view, decisions about thresholds are based entirely on probabilistic prior knowledge of how the objects in a gradable adjective's domain distribute relative to the scalar property it expresses (Lassiter and Goodman 2014, 2015); according to the second view, a formal property of adjective meaning --- scale structure --- is primarily responsible for threshold determination (Kennedy 2007, Potts 2008, Qing and Franke 2014a, 2014b). We identify different predictions of the two approaches and present the results of an experimental study that supports the representational approach over the distributional one.

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