

Scalar Evaluatives: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives

In this paper we consider the scalar properties of morality-related evaluative adjectives. These adjectives comprise (i) thin moral adjectives (e.g. *ethical/unethical, right/wrong*); (ii) thick moral adjectives (e.g. *courageous/coward, loyal/disloyal*) and (iii) general purpose value & deontic adjectives (e.g. *justified/unjustified*).

Solt 2018 considers the question of whether gradable adjectives are subject to what she calls *ordering subjectivity* (or *scalar variation* in Bylina 2016), namely the property whereby a disagreement involving comparative uses of those adjectives is bound to be perceived as subjective. To test this, Solt asks subjects whether they consider a dialogue like (1) to be a matter of fact or a matter of opinion:

- (1) a. Eating dairy is more ethical than eating soy.
b. I disagree; eating soy is more ethical than eating dairy.

Preliminary results show that morality-related adjectives are subject to ordering subjectivity as well. But why does ordering subjectivity arise? Solt 2018 and others hypothesize that ordering subjectivity may arise due to different factors, among them: (a) semantic multidimensionality (e.g. *healthy*, see Sassoon 2013; McNally & Stojanovic 2016), (b) meta-semantic multidimensionality (color terms), (c) experientiality (e.g. *tasty*) or else sensitivity to “qualitative” readings of the relevant adjectives (e.g. *heavy, long*; see McNally & Stojanovic 2016, Kennedy 2013), and (d) sensitivity to features of the particular distribution of the relevant property over the object of which it is predicated (e.g. *bumpy, curved*, see Solt 2018).

Surprisingly however, moral adjectives do not fall clearly under any of those categories, according to available tests. If moral adjectives do not fall under any of the foregoing categories, and yet appear to be ordering-subjective, we can hypothesize that their ordering-subjectivity is of a different kind, which we will call *axiological subjectivity*. We hypothesize that morality-related evaluative adjectives are axiologically subjective.

Contrary to Sassoon and Fadlon 2017, who suggest that “naturalness in dimension-counting constructions can indeed be used as a diagnostic of conceptual additivity and gradedness”, we propose to characterize axiological subjectivity in terms of *separability*: informally, if different factors make separate contributions to the meaning of an adjective which can be considered independently of other factors, we call them *separable*. Separability is an important property of a relation, because together with certain continuity assumptions implies certain structural properties of the representation (namely, additivity and invariance up to positive affine transformations).

Definition 1 *Factor X is strongly separable from factor Y iff $\forall x_1, x_2 \in X, \forall y_1, y_2 \in Y : (x_1, y_1) \geq (x_2, y_1) \leftrightarrow (x_1, y_2) \geq (x_2, y_2)$.*

Our current hypothesis is that axiologically subjective adjectives do not display separability. Based on the claim that additivity entails separability, we argue that moral adjectives are not separable based on simple contra-positive reasoning by checking the additive behavior of these adjectives (assuming certain standard continuity conditions).

Bylina 2016. • Kennedy 2013 • McNally and Stojanovic 2016 • Sassoon 2013 • Sassoon and Fadlon 2017. Discrete Dimension Accessibility in Multidimensional Concepts: the Noun - Adjective Distinction (ms.) • Solt 2018. Multidimensionality, subjectivity and scales: Experimental evidence. •