

## Bounded and unbounded adjectives

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### Outline

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

- (1) *Nongradable adjectives*
  - a. a (\*very) daily newspaper
  - b. (\*very) classical ballet
  - c. a (\*very) pictorial atlas
- (2) *Bounded adjectives*
  - a. The door is open/closed.
  - b. The rod is straight/bent.
  - c. The bottle is empty/full.
- (3) *Unbounded adjectives*
  - a. Max is tall/short.
  - b. The book is good/bad.
  - c. Cindy is happy/sad.

### 2. SYNTACTIC EFFECTS OF (UN)BOUNDEDNESS

#### • Modifiers

- (4) a. *Bounded* (proportional modifiers)  
completely/almost/half + (2)
- b. *Unbounded*  
very/terribly/fairly + (3)

#### • Nonverbal modal complements in Dutch must be bounded (Barbiers 1995).

- (5) a. De trossen mogen los.  
The hawsers may loose  
'The hawsers may be loosened.'
- b. De fles moet leeg.  
The bottle must empty  
'The bottle must be emptied.'
- (6) a. \*Het kantoor moet groot.  
The office must big  
'The office must be made big.'

- b. \*Die wagen kan snel/traag.  
That car can fast/slow  
'That car can drive fast/slow.'

#### • Predicates of resultative small clauses must denote bounded scales (Vanden Wyngaerd 2001, Wechsler 2005).

- (7) a. Frank heeft de ballon \*groot/aan stukken geblazen.  
'Frank blew the balloon big/to pieces.'
- b. Het drukke verkeer heeft de sporen \*diep/plat gereden.  
'Heavy traffic drove the tracks deep/flat.'
- c. Van zong zich \*slaperig/bewusteloos.  
'Van sang himself sleepy/unconscious.'

### 3. MAIN CLAIM

#### Main Claim

- (8) The bounded-unbounded distinction in adjectives is like other cases of the homogeneous-quantized distinction, in so far as
  - a. shifts from bounded to unbounded and vice versa are frequent, and
  - b. in certain syntactic structures, bounded-unbounded shifts are strongly ruled out.

Ontology of Quantities		
	homogeneous/cumulative/divisive	quantized
Nouns	mass	count
Verbs	atelic	telic
Adjectives	unbounded	bounded

#### • Shifts from one category to the other (eg Borer 2005a, Michaelis 2005):

- (9) a. That's quite a bit of carpet for the money. (count → mass)
- b. She sampled some wines. (mass → count)

#### • Nouns may fail to be able to shift from mass to count and vice versa.

- (10) a. \*That's quite a bit of three carpets for the money.
- b. \*There are three wine in the cellar.

- Borer (2005a,b):
  - content words: meanings are vague and malleable → shifts easily occur
  - function words & syntactic structures: meanings are strong → not easily coerced

4. (UN)BOUNDEDNESS IS MALLEABLE

4.1. *Examples of shifts*

(11) Re (8a): (un)boundedness depends on the noun (or something related to the noun) that the adjective is predicated of → the distinction is *syncategorematic*.

(12) George Orwell was a mediocre novelist, but a brilliant journalist. (Carstairs 1971)

(13) a. The door is completely/half/almost open.

b. \*The door is very/terribly/fairly open.

(14) a. \*?a completely/half/almost open attitude

b. a very/terribly/fairly open attitude

4.2. *Corpus data (British National Corpus)*

- “very open” (49 hits)

(15) 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)

(16) a. bird-song from the washing bowl, the door almost open  
b. with respect to the lower, diodes D 1 and D 4 being reverse biased and almost open circuit at such times.  
c. his correspondence with his brother became really acrimonious. For a time it was almost open warfare between them.  
d. The leaves on the thorn trees were almost open

- “half open” (35 hits):

(17) door, gate, mouth, eyes, lid, top, shirt, wings, flaps

- “completely open” (21 hits):

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

(19) John is completely \*tall/\*?angry/happy.

4.3. *More examples*

(20) a. De cement is almost/half/completely hard.

b. Their attitude towards violent crime is very/terribly/fairly hard.

(21) a. een (\*half)lange tafel. (M. De Belder, p.c.)  
'a (half)long table'

- b. een halflange rok  
a half.long skirt  
'a mid-length skirt'
- (22) a. ??Outside it's completely hot. (Kennedy & McNally 2005:365)  
b. The baby's face is completely hot.
- (23) a. ??Milk is completely white.  
b. His suit was completely white.
- (24) a. The meat is half cooked.  
b. The crops are partially frozen.
- (25) a. a very/fairly wet climate  
b. a half/completely wet towel/handkerchief
- (26) a. This region of the country is very dry.  
b. The glasses are completely dry.

5. (UN)BOUNDEDNESS IS NOT MALLEABLE

5.1. *Nonverbal modal complements*

(6) a. \*Het kantoor moet groot.  
b. \*Die wagen kan snel/traag.

- Nonverbal modal complements are strongly bounded, and cannot shift to an unbounded reading, because the meaning of the structure is such that this is prevented.

(27) a. Zijn presentatiestijl is erg/\*helemaal/\*half/\*bijna los.  
'His style of presentation is very/completely/half/almost loose.'  
b. Haar houding is erg/\*helemaal/\*half/\*bijna open.  
'Her attitude is very/completely/half/almost open.'

(28) a. \*De presentatiestijl voor dit programma moet los.  
'The presentation style for this show needs to be loose.'  
b. \*Zijn houding kon open.  
'His attitude could be open.'

- Nonverbal modal complements constitute a syntactic structure that imposes boundedness. This is incompatible with an adjective that becomes unbounded in virtue of combining with an unbounded subject.
- Interestingly, the shift from unbounded to bounded that is impossible in (6) and (28) can be effected by adding a functional morpheme to the adjective, viz. the comparative morpheme.

(29) a. Het kantoor moet groter.  
'The office must be made bigger.'  
b. Die wagen kan sneller/trager.  
'That car can drive faster/slower.'

(30) a. De presentatiestijl voor dit programma moet losser.  
'The presentation style for this show needs to be looser.'  
b. Zijn houding kon opener.  
'His attitude could be more open.'

- The comparative turns an unbounded adjective into a bounded one. The meaning of the comparative is strong: it overrides any effect on the boundedness that the addition of a subject might have.

## 5.2. Resultatives

- (7) a. Frank heeft de ballon \*groot/aan stukken geblazen.  
b. Het drukke verkeer heeft de sporen \*diep/plat gereden.  
c. Van zong zich \*slaperig/bewusteloos.
- (31) a. De kinderen hebben de poort open gezongen.  
'The children sang the gate open.'
- b. \*De kinderen hebben de boze tovenaer open gezongen.  
'The children sang the bad magician open.'
- (32) a. Frank heeft de ballon \*groot/groter geblazen.  
'Frank blew the balloon big/bigger.'
- b. Het drukke verkeer heeft de sporen \*diep/dieper gereden.  
'Heavy traffic drove the tracks deep/deeper.'

- Intensifying resultatives: literal meaning is lost, interpretation of high quantity or intensity of V:

- (33) a. Mick talked/laughed/worked his head off.  
b. Lisa laughed herself silly/sick/to death/to oblivion.  
c. Sonny cried himself blind.  
d. Wendy yelled/sang her heart out.  
e. Maria worked her hands to the bone.

- Adjectives like *silly* and *sick* are normally unbounded, with the same kind of subject:

- (34) a. Mick is very/\*?completely silly/sick.  
b. Sonny is \*?very/completely blind.

- Yet in the intensifying resultative construction, they must take bounded modifiers:

- (35) a. Lisa laughed herself completely/half/\*very silly  
b. Lisa laughed herself completely/half/\*very sick.

- These adjectives shift from an unbounded use in (34) to a bounded one in (35), without a concomitant change in the subject.

- Intensifying resultatives involve a loss of lexical meaning. Postma (1995) argues that this phenomenon is triggered by certain syntactic configurations, e.g. conjunction.

- (36) Het schip    verging        met man en muis  
The ship    went down    with man and mouse  
'The ship sank with everyone on it.'

- (37) Every Tom, Dick, and Harry came to the meeting.  
'Everyone came to the meeting.'

- The intensifying resultative is a syntactic configuration in which literal meaning can be suspended (subject to lexical idiosyncrasy). Boundedness contributed by resultative syntax is not incompatible with this (see (35)).
- Boundedness may also be the result of metaphorical extension:

- (38) De verlegen prinses is (helemaal/\*erg) open gebloeid.  
the shy princess is completely/very open bloomed  
'The shy princess became open like a flower.'

## 6. CONCLUSION

The bounded-unbounded distinction in adjectives resembles

- the mass-count distinction in nouns
- the telic-atelic distinction in verbs

in that

- shifts from bounded to unbounded and vice versa are frequent
- in certain syntactic structures, bounded-unbounded shifts are strongly ruled out

Further Questions

- What exactly in the syntax of resultatives and modal complements triggers boundedness?
- How exactly is the bounded-unbounded distinction a subcase of the homogeneous-quantized distinction?

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