1 Background and requirements

Syrett et al. (2009) (henceforth SKL) provide experimental evidence for the theory of gradable adjectives developed by Kennedy & McNally (2005) and Kennedy (2007). The paper reports on a number of experiments with both children and adults. The whole paper is worth reading, but we are going to focus just on experiment 1 (section 2, the only required section). This is partly because we are short on time and partly because the paper employs symbols and terminology that we haven’t seen yet. The goal of this handout is to fill in some background details and try to articulate why the researchers undertook this set of experiments.

2 Scale structure: the central hypothesis

Scale structure (Kennedy & McNally 2005)

- totally open, tall, short
- lower closed, wet, bent
- upper closed, pure, straight
- totally closed, opaque, open

Scale structure throughout One might be tempted to treat the closed-scale items as simple properties like married. However, even they have true scale structure: (i) they can be modified by very, and (ii) they can appear in comparatives (KM05:§1; K07:§3.1).
Adverbs for distinguishing scales (KM05:§3; K07:§4.2)

- Maximality: *completely, fully, totally, absolutely, 100%, perfectly, . . .*
- Proportion: *half, mostly, most of the way, two-thirds, three-sevenths, . . .*
- Minimality: *slightly, somewhat, partially, . . .*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverb</th>
<th>Totally open</th>
<th>Totally closed</th>
<th>Upper closed</th>
<th>Lower closed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximality</td>
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<td>Proportion</td>
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<td>Minimality</td>
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Table 1: Summary of adverb patterns. The missing patterns are ruled out semantically. For example, proportion advs require upper and lower ends, so no adj could allow them but disallow maximality or minimality advs. Similarly, no adj could allow maximality and minimality advs without also allowing proportion advs.

**Acquisition angle on the adverbs**  
Syrett & Lidz (2010): 30-month-olds “appear to be aware of such distributional differences and recruit them in word learning” (p. 258).

### 3 Understanding the experiment

As before, I've formulated some questions aimed at helping to get you focused on what's important for our discussion. You should keep studying section 2 of KM05 until you can answer all of them.

1. First, make sure that you understand the experimental design well enough to actually try out one of the conditions on a friend. (Dining halls seem like the perfect setting for seeing how people react . . .

2. What assumptions do KM05 make about the felicity conditions of the definite determiner?
(3) What role do the control examples in Table 1 play in the experiment?

(4) How well do the results of our in-class experiment align with those of SKL for (i) totally-open adjectives, (ii) lower-closed adjectives, and (iii) upper-closed adjectives?

(5) The adjective *full* was treated differently by children and adults. SKL offer two possible explanation for this. What are those explanations, and what is their assessment of them?
References


