1 Background and requirements

Syrett et al. (2009) 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)

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totally open  ────────  tall, short
lower closed  ●─        〇  wet, bent
upper closed  〇─        ●  pure, straight
 totalmente closed  ●─●  opaque, open
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Scale structure throughout One might be tempted to treat the closed-scale items as simple properties like married or atomic. However, even they have true scale structure: (i) they can be modified by very, and (ii) they can appear in comparatives (Kennedy & McNally 2005:§1; Kennedy 2007:§3.1).
Adverbs for distinguishing scales (Kennedy & McNally 2005:§3; Kennedy 2007:§4.2)

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

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).

Table 1: Summary of adverb patterns. A * means ungrammatical or at least very unusual, and a ✓ means grammatical/normal. The * combinations are ruled out semantically. For example, proportion adverbs require upper and lower ends, so no adjective could allow them but disallow maximality or minimality adjectives. Similarly, no adjective could allow maximality and minimality adverbs without also allowing proportion adverbs.
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 Syrett et al. 2009 until you can answer all of them.

(1) Make sure that you understand the experimental design well enough to actually try out the crucial conditions on a friend.

(2) What assumptions do Syrett et al. 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 Syrett et al. for (i) totally-open adjectives, (ii) lower-closed adjectives, and (iii) upper-closed adjectives?
References


