

Shiftability and goal-dependence in gradable adjectives

We investigate two subclasses of gradable adjectives in the positive form: RELATIVE gradable adjectives (RAs) like *tall* and ABSOLUTE gradable adjectives (AAs) like *full*. Prior research establishes a core distinction between RAs and AAs (Kennedy2007, SyrettEtAl2010): RAs are vague and inherently context-dependent (the threshold for *tall* is blurry, shiftable), while AAs can have precise, context-invariant interpretations (the threshold for *full* may be maximal fullness). However, in discourse, AAs also appear to be context-dependent: the same container might be described as *full* in a household task but not in a controlled experiment. Here, we investigate the hypothesis that context-dependence in AAs is fundamentally different from that exemplified by RAs. RAs are SEMANTICALLY CONTEXT DEPENDENT: they lack fixed contents, and introduce properties relative to discourse-salient comparison classes. AAs, by contrast, exhibit PRAGMATIC CONTEXT DEPENDENCE related to how expressions with precise meanings are used. A core prediction of this distinction is that, while both classes should display context sensitivity, only AAs should show signs of having context-invariant, precise meanings. Three experiments demonstrate this asymmetry in two ways (all contrasts reported are significant). Experiments1-2 show that RAs and AAs exhibit different sensitivity to previously established standards. Only AAs show asymmetric shiftability: previous exposure to a high-precision standard inhibits subsequently relaxing the standard. Experiment3 shows that, while both classes exhibit goal-sensitivity, only AAs revert to precise meanings when the standard is irrelevant to the discourse goal.

Experiments1-2 examined shiftability patterns for RAs and AAs over repeated uses. Participants judged images in trials like (3) (RAs) or (4) (AAs). Image came from sets of matching images that varied on continua of degrees along relevant dimensions (e.g. tallness, fullness). For AAs, but not RAs, a previous trial encoding a maximally-precise standard of precision (e.g. image of completely full glass for AAs, very tall ladder for RAs) decreased acceptance of that adjective on subsequent trials, i.e. participants resisted relaxing previously set standards.

Experiment3 asked whether standards are sensitive to relevance to discourse-salient goals, and how they are established when irrelevant to discourse goals. Participants judged images (3)-(4), following contexts (5)-(6) introducing goals supporting higher or lower standards, or making the standard irrelevant. Both classes displayed goal-sensitivity: high-standard contexts decreased acceptance of e.g. a fairly tall ladder as *tall*, a nearly empty cup as *empty*. However, when the standard was goal-irrelevant, only AAs reverted to high-precision standards, as expected if AAs have default precise meanings.

These results provide additional experimental justification for distinguishing RAs and AAs. We show that these classes differ in (i) the kinds of standard shifts possible over multiple uses of an adjective, and (ii) the availability of precise default interpretations in goal-irrelevant contexts.

- (1) Alex is *tall*. (2) The glass is *full*.
- (3) image: ladder; This item is {tall,short,neither}
- (4) image: glass; This item is {full,empty,neither}
- (5) Max is {getting a kite stuck on a chimney,getting a book from the top shelf,getting his bike}.
- (6) Max is {organizing a game of flip-cup,looking for beverages to refill,looking for his phone}.

REFERENCES

- Kennedy 2007. Vagueness and Grammar: The Semantics of Relative and Absolute Gradable Adjectives. *Linguistics and Philosophy*.
- Syrett, Kennedy & Lidz 2010. Meaning and context in children's understanding of gradable adjectives. *J Semantics* 27(1).