Extreme nouns and maximizers

Melania S. Masià (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

Degree modifiers with adverbial and adjectival forms constitute an important source of information for cross-categorial manifestations of gradability. One class of such modifiers are adverbs of completeness (*completamente* 'completely', *totalmente* 'totally') and their adjectival counterparts (*completo 'complete'*, *total* 'total') in Spanish. The former are maximizers, that is, modifiers restricted to adjectives whose scale has a maximum (Rotstein and Winter, 2004; Kennedy and McNally, 2005). The relation between the latter, adjectives of completeness [ACs], and an evaluative noun [EN] seems to be degree modification as well (1).

(1) Juan es un {completo genio / total idiota / absoluto desastre}.
     Juan is a   complete genio   total idiot   absolute mess

The presence of degree modification in the nominal domain is still controversial (Bolinger, 1972; Matushansky, 2002; Morzycki, 2009; Constantinescu, 2011; Sassoon, 2013). In this talk I use ACs to explore nominal gradability, from its existence to the relevance of scale structure in the lexical semantics of nouns. In particular, I argue that ENs are gradable and involve extremeness in their semantics. In addition, ACs constitute more evidence for the presence of a semantic gradable structure and a DegP in the NP. I show that they are maximizers and thus that scale structure is relevant in the semantics of (at least some) nouns.

Evaluative nouns denote extreme degrees

ENs are close to adjectives (Morzycki, 2009; Constantinescu, 2011; Sassoon, 2013). This can be observed in their occurrence in adjectival contexts like interrogatives with *cómo de* 'how much of' (2a), the *A/N of an N* construction (2b), or verb-less exclamatives (2c) (Milner, 1978; Suñer Gratacós, 1990; Hernanz, 2001; Villalba and Bartra-Kaufmann, 2010; Espinal, 2013; a.o.).

(2) a. ¿Cómo de {genio / desastre / alto / guapo / ??medico} es Juan?
          'How (much of a(n)) {genius / mess / tall / handsome / doctor} is Juan?'
     b. el {desastre / #médico / ??alto / estúpido } de Juan
          'that {genius / doctor / tall / stupid } of Juan'
     c. ¡{Un idiota / Un desastre / *Un médico / ??Alto / Tontísimo / Fantástico}, este chico!
          '{An idiot / A mess / A doctor / Tall / Very dumb / Fantastic}, this guy!'

Not any gradable adjective is possible in this constructions. In fact, they need to involve some extremeness, as the unacceptability of *alto* 'tall' shows (2b–c). I argue that the same requirement applies to ENs. Extreme adjectives (*wonderful*; Cruse, 1986; Morzycki, 2012) and ENs share a series characteristic, including ocurring with extreme degree modifiers (3a), being able to be intensified via prosodic prominence (3b), and entailing their non-extreme counterparts (3c).

(3) a. Juan es un {sencillo / soberano} {idiota / desastre / #médico}.
          'Juan is a {downright (lit. simple) / full-on} {idiot / mess / doctor}.'
     b. Juan es un {*idiooo*ta / de*saaas*tre / ??*méee*dico}. J. is a(n) {iiidiot / meeess / doooctor}.'
     c. Es un genio/desastre. 'He's a genius/mess' ⇒ Es listo/desordenado. 'He's smart/sloppy.'

I propose that ENs denote extreme degrees of properties. Extremeness consists on going off the salient scale of degrees in a context, to a point where no further distinctions between degrees are made (Morzycki, 2012). Intuitively, in order to be an idiot, someone has to be dumb to a degree above any expectation. ENs thus denote gradable predicates and use the same measure function as their non-extreme counterparts. In addition, they include the requirement that the individual possesses the property to a degree d that is situated above the contextually-provided relevant set of degrees C for that property. *Idiota* (4) thus denotes the property of being dumb to a degree that exceeds the greatest degree in the salient set of degrees in the context.

(4) $[\![idiota_C]\!] = \lambda d \lambda x[d > \mathbf{max}(C) \wedge \mathbf{dumb}(x)(d)]$

ACs are maximizers in the nominal domain

Maximizers are restricted to (upper-)closed scale adjectives (*completely full* but ??*completely tall*) and set the degree of the property denoted by the predicate to its maximum value. As a consequence of these semantics, they are associated with the following properties (R&W, 2004; K&McN, 2005): First, they entail that the end of the scale has been reached, so asserting that the individual has more of the property is contradictory. This only applies to *AC + EN* if one individual is being compared (5a). However, comparing two individuals' degree of the property appears to be acceptable. Second, they are compatible with *casi* 'almost', but this is not the case here (5b). Third, expressions modified by maximizers accept exceptive phrases. In this case, *AC + EN* behaves accordingly (5c). ACs display maximality behavior when modifying, for instance, adjectival nominalizations (*completa libertad* 'complete freedom').

(5) a. Juan es un completo idiota, pero {#podría serlo más / ?Pablo lo es más}.
   'Juan is a complete idiot, but {he could be / Pablo is} more of an idiot.'

   b. ?? Juan es un casi completo idiota. 'Juan is an almost complete idiot'

   c. ? Juan es un completo idiota, menos en asuntos de dinero.
   'Juan is a complete idiot, except with respect to money issues.'

I argue that ACs are maximizers: they set the degree of the property to the maximal value on the scale (6), as in K&McN (2005). However, the special features of extremeness cause the apparent non-maximizer behavior in (5). First, it is not (so) contradictory to say that someone is more of a complete idiot than someone else because the degrees of idiocy are all above the perspective scale: the maximum cannot be singled out, so it is conceivable that what we originally considered a maximum (Juan's degree of idiocy) wasn't so. Second, *casi* 'almost' seems to presuppose that the maximum be identifiable. Given that the relevant degrees of idiocy are off the scale, the difference between a complete idiot and an almost complete idiot becomes trivial (5b).

(6) $[\![AC]\!] = \lambda G_{\langle d, \langle e,t \rangle \rangle} \lambda x . \exists d[d = \mathbf{max}(S_G) \wedge G(d)(x)]$

Alternative analyses have focused on universal quantification over properties or dimensions associated with the noun. (Constantinescu, 2011; de Vries, 2010, 2015). In particular, a complete idiot would be someone that has all the properties we expect of an idiot. This is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, most nouns have dimensions associated with them, but only a few are compatible with ACs in the relevant reading. Second, nouns modified by ACs accept *with respect to* phrases, contradicting the universal quantification over dimensions.

(7) Juan es un completo idiota con respecto al dinero. 'Juan is a complete idiot wrt money.'

Consequences 1) A degree analysis of ENs means assuming a DegP in the extended NP (Morzycki, 2009; de Vries, 2010). This is consistent with the modifiers in (3a), and also with the acceptability of ENs with *muy* 'very' (*muy genio/desastre* '(lit.) very genius/mess). **2)** The analysis shows that scale maximums are relevant in the nominal domain as well, and raises the question of whether more maximality phenomena can be found, for instance in adjectival nominalizations (*completa limpieza* 'complete cleanness', ??*completa belleza* 'complete beauty) (cf. Constantinescu, 2011).

Selected references: Bolinger (1972). *Degree Words*. Mouton. **Constantinescu** (2011). *Gradability in the Nominal Domain*. PhD thesis, U. Leiden **Kennedy & McNally** [K&McN] (2005). Scale structure and the semantic typology of gradable predicates. *Language 81*(2), 345–381 **Hernanz** (2001). ¡En bonito lío me he metido! Notas sobre la afectividad en español. *Moenia 7*, 93–109. **Morzycki** (2009). Degree modification of gradable nouns *Natural Language Semantics 17*(2), 175–203 **Morzycki** (2012). Adjectival extremeness. *NLLT 30*(2), 567–609 **Rotstein & Winter** [R&W] (2004). Total adjectives vs. partial adjectives *NLS 12*(3), 259–288 **Sassoon** (2013). *Vagueness, Gradability and Typicality*. Brill **de Vries** (2010). *Evaluative Degree Modification of Adjectives and Nouns*. MA thesis, U. Utrecht