

What can be more or less?

The notion of degree and its realizations in natural languages

Workshop Proposal for SLE 2027 (Košice)

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Workshop Description

The notion of degree, which, according to the Latin etymon *grādūs* ‘step’, ‘scale’, implies the possibility of increase and decrease, could be argued to go back to Aristotle’s *Categories*:

- Qualifications admit of a more and a less; for one thing is called more pale or less pale than another, and more just than another. (10b26)

This shift from increase to decrease and vice versa raises the question of the relationship between degree and comparison. Comparison involves establishing an ordering between two or more values, whereas degree may be understood as the position of a value on a scale.

Ancient grammars treat degree in terms of adjectival comparison (See the *Tekhnē* of Dionysius Thrax). However, the Stagirite has a much broader notion of *more and less* than the later grammatical tradition, since *more or less* can also apply to verbs:

- Doing and being-affected admit [...] of a more and a less. For it is possible to heat more and less [...] and to be pained more and less. (11b1)

Modern linguistics likewise provides evidence for gradable verbal predicates. (See Greenbaum 1970; Bolinger 1972; Abeillé/Godard 2003 among others). Modern analysts also apply gradability to adverbs (Quirk et al 1985; Hengeveld 2023), nouns (Morzycki 2009), prepositional phrases or even, somewhat controversially, to prepositions:

- But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak? (*As you like it*, III,2)
- The nail went right (through) the wall (Quirk et al. 1985: 449)

A sentence such as *I must absolutely do that*, raises particularly interesting questions. Does the modal verb provide a dimension (Kennedy 1999; Kennedy & McNally 2005), i.e. a parameter "indicating the kind of measurement" involved and allowing degrees of necessity to be ordered on a scale, or is it the adverb itself that constructs the dimension? Or is the dimension constructed compositionally by the modal verb and the adverb together?

On a more general level, if degree is fundamentally based on “more and less”, how do we distinguish degree from quantity and measurement? Should we posit, following Sapir (1944), that grading precedes measurement and is thus different from measurement? Regarding the example:

- He drinks/runs excessively,

we might say that the adverb refers to a certain quantity and that this quantity “presupposes” (Sapir 1944: 93) grading. But on closer examination, *excessively* does not only specify a quantity; it also expresses a degree that goes beyond a contextually given quantitative norm, illustrating a three-step pathway, from degree to quantity and back to degree, which clearly shows that quantity and degree are fundamentally different. One may note in addition that *run*, unlike *drink*, does not give access to a quantity dimension at first sight: it may pertain to speed, duration, frequency and so on, which shows that the relevant dimension must be constructed contextually.

This kind of examples raises another question: how can we distinguish degree from manner? Should we say, following Duplâtre & Duffley (2026), that degree can serve to express manner in the absence of a genuine manner expression? Or should we say that degree and manner can both be expressed at the same time?

Conversely, it seems that manner can give rise to a degree reading:

- An easily debatable proposition (Quirk et al. 1985: 448)

Manner also provides a dimension allowing for the expression a degree:

- He plays well, very well, surprisingly well, etc.

Aspect may likewise provide a basis for grading interpretations inasmuch as adverbial expressions may express the different degrees of completion of the process. This is the case with *I understand a little*, *I understand it well*, and *I totally understand*. Should we say that the description of the different phases of an event provides favorable conditions for the expression of degree to emerge? This would mean that degree is independent from intensification and sensitive to the availability of a dimension, whether it be a manner dimension or an aspectual dimension.

Generally, the most striking fact is the plasticity of degree expressions: epistemic modality (see the German modal adverb *wirklich* (van Os 1989)) can give rise to degree; this is also the case for evaluative adverbs (*He played surprisingly well* (Quirk et al. 1985: 449)) or pragmatic adverbs (*I'm frankly surprised* (*Ibid.*, 447)). Should we consider in this case that degree is secondary, that it is only an effect (*Ibid.*, 448 ; Paradis 1997:19). Or should these examples be analyzed as cases of polyfunctionality? Since not all of these occurrences encode degree lexically, does degree result from the interaction between two contents or from the syntactic context or from both?

Adverbs are not the only means of expressing gradability: it can also be expressed by repetitions, comparatives and superlatives, prefixes, suffixes, word order and intonation. All these devices vary considerably across languages and are an inexhaustible source of creativity. For instance, in this example from *Hamlet* (II, 2), the domain expression *north-north-west* provides a directional scale which allows the dimension of madness to emerge, thus giving rise to a grading effect:

- I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.

This kind of effect does not seem to be associated with the specific prosodic parameter that Paradis (1997: 20) identifies as expressing contrastive focus. Should we therefore dismiss this kind of effect, or should we broaden the class of scalar modifiers identified by Paradis?

While the number of degree expressions seems amazingly vast, there are nevertheless things that cannot be more or less:

- 11a5. Triangle and square do not seem to admit of a more, nor does any other shape. (Aristotle, *Categories*)

However, this impossibility does not only rely on mathematical principles. As pointed out by Greenbaum (1970) and Allerton (2002: 139), there may exist collocational restrictions:

- to deeply hate, *to deeply like
- to severely injure, * to severely disappoint

Pragmatic factors are also essential to the use and emergence of intensifiers: *absolutely*, for instance, serves to “convince other people or oneself” (Bäcklund 1973: 222) and *really* (Labov 1984: 43-44) “acts to intensify the main predication” by “designating a state of reality greater than normal”, thus expressing the speaker’s “commitment to the proposition”.

Such items may also reveal the membership in a given speech community. (see the teenage intensifier *pure* (Macaulay 2006))

This raises a more general question: are pragmatic factors decisive in the emergence, grammaticalization or decline of degree expressions?

This workshop welcomes any and all proposals concerning the history of the concept of degree, its definition, its syntactic and pragmatic realizations in any language, whether it be a cross-linguistic study or one devoted only to a particular language. All theoretical frameworks are accepted.

References

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