Color Adjectives and Absolute Standards: Experimental Evidence

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Abstract

Gradable adjectives like "long" and "expensive" have played a central role in recent debates in philosophy over how best to understand the interaction of context and linguistic meaning. Gradable adjectives are so-called because they can apply to objects in varying grades or degrees: a lunch can be very long or just fairly long; a weapon system can be extremely expensive or just mildly expensive. Semanticists have distinguished two types of gradable adjectives: *relative* adjectives, like "tall" and "expensive" have context sensitive standards, which objects have to meet or exceed to count as being tall or expensive. In contrast, *absolute* adjectives like "full" or "spotted" have conventionally fixed standards, and therefore display less context sensitivity than relative adjectives.

Given that color adjectives are a type of gradable adjective (a car can be "very red", "perfectly red", "completely red", and so on), are they relative or absolute? If they are absolute adjectives, then they will display less context sensitivity than some theorists have attributed to them (Hansen, 2011; Kennedy and McNally, 2010). It has been argued recently, on the basis of armchair judgments, that color adjectives are indeed absolute adjectives; more specifically, they are *minimum-standard* absolute adjectives, which require an object to possess only a minimum degree of the relevant property for the adjective to apply to the object (Clapp 2012; see McNally 2011 for a modification of this view). In this paper, we evaluate whether color adjectives pattern with relative or minimum standard absolute adjectives by using two different types of tests for evaluating the semantic properties of gradable adjectives:

- Entailment tests (Kennedy 2007, Kennedy and McNally 2005)

- The presupposition accommodation test (Syrett et al., 2010)

We are currently developing experiments that apply these tests to color adjectives. We expect that color adjectives will pattern more closely with relative than absolute gradable adjectives, and therefore inherit the context sensitivity characteristic of relative adjectives, contrary to recent claims. We will explain the theoretical background of these tests, discuss our experimental approach, and present some of our initial findings.

References

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