

It's so NP!

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1 The construction

- (1) a. Matching shirt and hat is so McDonalds. (\approx cheap, unfashionable)
b. Buying DVDs is so 2004! (\approx out-of-date)
c. Yeah, that is so Obama! (\approx cool)
- (2) a. Ad: "How to dance at a club or party: An analytical approach"
Comment: "This is so Google!"
b. this is SO PARIS ! absolutely amazing ! (about a fashion show)
c. I preferred rural France, Paris is so Paris
d. It is SO New York City in the 1970s! (about Buenos Aires)
e. It is a masterpiece video. The way it's put together, it is so New York.

It's a currently emerging, or at least new, (American) English construction. An NP is modified by a degree modifier, co-occurring typically with gradable adjectives rather than with nouns.

'Gradable individuals' do not come from the lexicon, the meaning is derived on the go:

- (3) a. This is so [Madonna at Golden Globes (when she won for Evita)]!
b. That's so Harvey! (both the speaker and the hearer, say, know Harvey to be charming but ineffectual) (example from Muffy Siegel, p.c.)

Questions: Are these individuals actually adjectives in this construction? What kind of an adjective they are? If they are nouns, why do they look like adjectives?

2 Is it an adjective?

The fact that gradability is a property not just of adjectives, but of nouns, verbs, adverbs and prepositions as well goes back to Sapir 1944 (Bolinger 1972; Doetjes 1997; Hay et al. 1999; Tsujimura 2001; Van den Wyngaerd 2001; Paradis 2001; Wechsler 2005; Morzycki 2009). Are 'gradable individuals' adjectives? Classic diagnostic criteria to identify adjectives:

- Degree modifiers of a certain kind (Wasow 1977, 1980):
 - (4) a. George is a(n) {enormous/big/slight/minor/*so/#pretty/*very/*so very/*rather} idiot.
b. Matching shirt and hat is {*enormous/*big/*huge/*slight/*minor/so/pretty/very/so very/rather} {McDonalds/cheap}.
- Exclamative construction:
 - (5) How very {Obama/*idiot/cool/cheap}!
- Strict subcategorization (complement of 'linking' verbs, aka *seem*-test):
 - (6) He {is/seems/felt/became} so Obama!
- Coordination (Dik 1968, Peterson 1981):
 - (7) The martini always seems so James Bond, so "Sex in the City," so elegant.

But: all these are more semantic than syntactic in nature, the facts cut across syntactic categories (Maling 1983, Matushansky 2002):

- (8) They seemed {so / too / very} {in love / at home / out of shape} (Maling 1983)
- (9) a. How out of shape Lee looked!
b. *How at the railroad crossing they lived!

- (10) a. Lee sure seems { *out of the house / out of his mind }
b. Robin seems { a fool / *prime-minister }
c. { Lee / *The square root of two } seems irrational
d. The problem seems insoluble/*mathematical (Bresnan 1973)

(11) The surgeon operated slowly and with great care

(Matushansky 2002): “I argue that the complement must contain a DegP [...] Scalar APs, DPs and PPs can always appear there.”

Scalarity coercion with the help of a degree modifier sometimes saves the situation:

(12) The problem seems pretty much mathematical.

Non-semantic tests for adjectivity:

- *enough*-shift (*enough* can never precede an adjective) (Bresnan 1973, Maling 1983):

- (13) a. Robin seems { *enough sensible / sensible enough }
b. *Robin seems { in enough love / .. }
c. ??Robin seems { in love enough / .. }
d. These french fries are { ?enough McDonalds / ??McDonalds enough } (for me)

- Synthetic comparatives and superlative, *un*-prefix (Siegel 1977), prenominal position:
**Britneyer*, **Britneyest* (could find a good 1-syllable example), **un-McDonalds*, **These very McDonalds french fries...*, **Those very 1994 shoes of yours ..*

Summary: we are not at a position to definitely classify ‘gradable individuals’ as adjectives, the only thing we can be sure about is that we are dealing with a gradable predicate that patterns in its behavior wrt gradability environments with ‘true’ adjectival gradable predicates (of type $\langle e, d \rangle$ or $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle$, or $\langle e, \langle d, t \rangle$) – depending on the particular implementation of gradability, cf. Kennedy and McNally 2005, Rett 2008, Kennedy 1999, 2007 and Neeleman et al 2004 a.m.o.).

Does it make sense to call them ‘adjective-like gradable predicates’ or just gradable adjectives? Anyway, they are gradable and we turn to their scale structure .

3 The scale structure

Scale typology (Rothstein&Winter 2004, Kennedy&McNally 2005): open, lower closed, upper closed, totally closed. (14) classifies ‘gradable individuals’ as upper closed scale (like *certain*, *safe*, *pure*, *accurate*; *straight*, *flat*, *clean*, *unworried*), even when the property associated with *e* is open scale (cf. 14c).

- (14) a. Those shoes are { totally/absolutely } { 1994/clean }.
b. That’s totally { Einstein/accurate }!
c. ??That’s totally/absolutely { old/smart }.

Intuitively, the property gets picked precisely because *e* possesses it to a significantly high extent, and probably to the highest extent compared to all the other (conversationally active) *es*, so that *e* serves as some kind of maximum of all other available candidates.

Complications:

- (15) a. Those shoes are { downright/positively/straight-up } 1994!
b. These cookies are { flat-out/downright } St. John! (St. John is a good restaurant)
b. ??{ downright/positively/straight-up } { safe/pure }.

(15) shows similarity btw ‘gradable individuals’ and ‘extreme adjectives’ (Morzycki in print). Extreme adjectives: *fantastic*, *wonderful*, *fabulous*, *gorgeous*, *magnificent*, *glorious*, *spectacular*, *outstanding*, *tremendous*, *huge*, *gigantic*. Some extreme degree modifiers: *simply*, *just*, *positively*, *absolutely*, *flat-out*, *full-on*, *out-and-out*, *downright*, *outright*, *straight-up*.

Morzycki's account uses a contextual domain restriction variable C (von Fintel 1994):

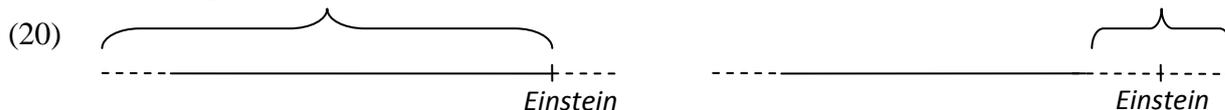
- (16) a. Everyone _{C} had a good time.
 b. $\forall x [[x \in C \ \& \ x \text{ is a person}] \rightarrow x \text{ had a good time}]$
- (17) a. $[[big_C]] = \lambda x \lambda d. x \in C \ \& \ x \text{ is } d\text{-big}$ (= 49 Morzycki in print)
 b. $[[gigantic_C]] = \lambda x \lambda d. d > \max(C) \ \& \ x \text{ is } d\text{-big}$ (= 51 Morzycki in print)

The 'extremeness' of gradable individuals might help explain the fact that they are not that good in comparative constructions (though not completely ungrammatical):

- (18) a. ?Those shoes seem more 1994 than any I've actually seen in 1994!
 b. ?She is more Audrey Hepburn than any of the girls I've met.
 c. ?His term paper isn't as Einstein as I expected it to be.
- (19) a. ?Godzilla is more gigantic than Mothra. (= 10 Morzycki in print)
 b. ?Monkeys are less marvelous than ferrets.
 c. ?Everything is more scrumptious than natto.

Alarming, 'gradable individuals' can be modified by *very*, cf. *very 1994* vs. **very gigantic*, but in this respect they pattern with 'contextual extreme adjectives' like *brilliant*, *certain*, *obvious* etc., a class also described in (Morzycki in print).

The difference between the readings that we discussed ('upper-closed scale' and 'extreme') basically is the position of e on the relevant scale wrt to the contextual restriction:



The fact that this 'exceptional' or 'extreme' reading is active with gradable individuals is parallel to an observation made in (Matushansky 2002) that when a non-gradable predicate undergoes scalarity coercion, it can receive 'outstanding' interpretation in the same environments where other gradable predicates don't:

- (21) a. John is quite a fool.
 b. William is quite a doctor! (an outstanding doctor rather than a typical one)

Summary: 'Gradable individuals' seem to belong to the 'extreme' scalar type. But what property exactly do they denote?

4 Individuals as prototypes; dimension composition

It is not always that easy to identify the exact single property the individual refers to in this construction:

- (22) a. Her hair is so Madonna at Golden Globes! (curly? big? combination of both? sth else?)
 b. That's so Harvey! (Harvey being very clumsy and charming)

'Gradable individuals' remind concepts with prototypes (Kamp and Partee 1995, Osherson and Smith 1981): we measure "similarity to the concept's 'best' exemplar" (Osherson and Smith 1981: 35) wrt a number of parameters, or 'dimensions'.

Intuitively, properties of the 'gradable individual' serve as dimensions, and the individual gets interpreted as a multidimensional gradable predicate. Sassoon (in prep.) analyses different ways multidimensional predicates incorporate dimensions and differences in the way nouns and adjectives do it:

- (23) Nouns (*bird*) are associated with multiple dimensions (characteristic features) which are incorporated through mean operations at an early processing stage. Thus, for an entity to

be classified under a noun, its mean degree in the dimensions of the category (or of one of its exemplars) should reach the membership threshold ('standard').

Adjectives (*healthy*) are associated with either a single categorization criterion or a set of criteria which are incorporated through Boolean operations (conjunction or disjunction, or equivalently, universal or existential quantifiers). Thus, to count as an instance of an adjective, an entity has to reach the standard in either a single dimension or a dimension-conjunction or -disjunction. The processing of the dimensions is explicit. Hence, adjectives, but not nouns, have dimensional argument slots that can be overtly saturated or bound.

Diagnostics: *except* phrases, *with respect to* phrases, *in every respect*...

- (24) a. Tweety is healthy in every respect
b. #Tweety is a bird wrt flying / size

'Gradable individuals' look more like multidimensional adjectives:

- (25) a. Ami's facial features are SO Paris Hilton, except for the Asian eyes (from web)
b. This is so LA...except for all the bicycles! (about a photo)
(26) a. These shoes are 1994 in every respect! (?)

Summary: The gradable property denoted by 'gradable individuals' is a complex, multidimensional property which picks its dimensions from individual's properties. *Einstein* is like *healthy* in that its dimensions (properties of the individual Einstein) get unfolded and are accessible for overt manipulation.

- (27) $[[Einstein_C]] = \lambda x \lambda d \forall F \in F(Einstein, c): d > \max(C)$ and x is d -F
($F(Einstein, c)$ stands for dimensions picked by context for Einstein)

Can this move itself be the motivation for the whole shift and its distributional adjective-like manifestations? We believe so.

5 Side note: mediation problem

One could notice that rather often the subject of a sentence with a 'gradable individual' does not exactly match the type of the 'gradable individual': it's not a case that it's always a person that is compared to, say, Paris Hilton, as in (25a) repeated here:

- (25) a. Ami's facial features are SO Paris Hilton, except for the Asian eyes (from web)
(14) a. Those shoes are {totally/absolutely} 1994.

In (25a), Ami is compared to Paris Hilton indirectly, the comparison is mediated by her facial features (Paris' features get compared to Ami's). In (14a), the mediation is implicit: there is no overt constituent that indicates that the shoes are compared to *the shoes that were typically worn in 1994*.

The mediation / non-locality problem is not unique for 'gradable individuals' (Kennedy 2007, fn. 11, Schwarz 2010):

- (28) Mia is tall [for a girl].
(29) a. This story is sophisticated [for a 3-year old].
b. Mia has an expensive hat [for a 3-year old].
(30) $\{x: x \text{ is a 3-year old}\} \Leftrightarrow_{\text{mediation}} \{y: y \text{ is a story by/for a 3-year old}\}$

Usually, the *for*-phrase denotes a comparison class that helps fix a contextual standard of comparison, so that Mia in (28) exceeds the standard height of girls, not that of individuals in general (Bale 2008). A presupposition that Mia is included in the set of girls is attested in this sentence. The inclusion presupposition is absent (29). A mediation relation as in (30) has been postulated at least for some of these cases.

I've been aiming for an explanation of (at least some of cases of) mediation that involves assuming that certain *for*-phrases in fact denote *functional standards* (Heim 2000, Kagan and Aleksejenko 2010) rather than (mediated) comparison classes, as in *This hat is expensive for me*. 'Gradable individuals' are an example of mediation that cannot be reduced to functional standards and thus prove a need for a non-functional-standard analysis of mediation effects.

Conclusion

'Gradable individuals' are adjective-like multidimensional extreme gradable predicates that use contextually prominent individual's properties as its dimensions, and require an extremely high value for all of its dimensions. That's what we sketch in (27):

- (27) $[[Einstein_C]] = \lambda x \lambda d \forall F \in F(Einstein, c): d > \max(C) \text{ and } x \text{ is } d\text{-}F$
($F(Einstein, c)$ stands for dimensions picked by context for Einstein)

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