
An experimental study on coercion in Spanish adjectival phrases

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Scalar adjectival phrases may be classified in two broad categories: bounded (or absolute), with adjectives such as *dry*, *wet* or *full*, and *open* (or relative), with adjectives like *tall*, *fat* or *clever*. The former have a maximum and/or minimum degree and an internal standard of comparison, whilst the latter lack specific limits and have a contextual standard of comparison. From a lexicalist standpoint, the difference lies in the distinction between two kinds of scalar adjectives (Kennedy & McNally, 2005): absolute adjectives, which combine with quantifiers like *totally*, *completely* or *slightly*, and relative adjectives, which usually combine with a quantifier like *very*.

The current experimental study was designed to test this. We created two lists of sentences, one with absolute and the other with relative adjectives, combined with two different quantifiers, *slightly* versus *very*, and put the sentences to test by means of a self-paced reading task. As a control condition, we made up another list of sentences where the same adjectives under a metaphorical reading were combined with the “expected” quantifier.

Results showed significant differences between literal and metaphoric uses of all adjectives. As for the combination with quantifiers, open adjectives showed significantly longer reading times for adjectives with unexpected quantifiers, which is interpreted as evidence for coercion. On the contrary, bounded adjectives show no differences in reading times as a function of quantifiers, which seems to indicate that there is no coercion in this case. Thus, the current results purport to show that absolute adjectives acquire their standard of comparison in syntax, whilst relative adjectives do so on the basis of lexical information.

References: • Kennedy, C. & L. McNally (2005) Scale structure, degree modification, and the semantics of gradable predicates. *Language* 81, 345–381.