Relative, absolute, evaluative, multidimensional: Towards a comprehensive typology of gradable adjectives

It is now well known that gradable adjectives fall into several distinct classes that pattern quite differently with respect to their linguistic behavior. Most well known, Kennedy & McNally (2005) and Kennedy (2007) discuss the distinction between relative gradable adjectives such as *tall*, whose interpretations are context dependent, and absolute gradable adjectives such as *full*, whose standards are relatively fixed. Even more basic is the distinction between dimensional adjectives such as both *tall* and *full*, whose meanings are seemingly based on objective measurement, and evaluative adjectives such as *beautiful*, which are essentially subjective (Bierwisch 1989). Finally, certain adjectives such as *healthy* have been characterized as multidimensional (Sassoon 2011), while others such as *gigantic* are described as extreme (Morzycki 2012).

Less attention has been given to how these various sorts of classification relate to one another. Beyond this, the individual classes remain surprisingly poorly defined, and the boundaries between them are blurry. Most fundamentally, it is an open question whether certain of these distinctions (e.g. relative vs. absolute) can be reduced to or derived from other more basic aspects of an adjective’s meaning.

In this talk, I report on ongoing research aimed at clarifying the landscape of this broad class, by establishing a comprehensive and empirically based typology of gradable adjectives. The starting point for the research is a database of 198 such adjectives, compiled on the basis of literature sources and expanded during the course of the project. I will discuss the results of a series of linguistic tests, corpus analyses and experiments on these items, in which we seek to answer questions including the following: To what extent do the subtypes above represent natural classes? What are the fundamental properties that define these classes? On what basis should an adjective be assigned to one (or more) of them? I further discuss how the differences between these classes might be accounted for within a scale-based approach to adjective meaning.