High degree readings of adjectives in finite result-clause constructions with negative polarity minimizers

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Introduction

Recent experimental studies such as Gotzner et al. 2018 report results related to how scalar implicatures affect the interpretation of gradable adjectives, focusing on factors such as polarity and boundedness. In this study, I analyse the role played by scalar implicatures in the interpretation of adjectives that express their high degree of intensity by means of a special type of degree result clause construction. In particular, I present work-in-progress on a less investigated phenomenon: high degree readings of adjectives that occur as primary predicates in finite result clause constructions (RCX), where the secondary predication in the result clause (RCl) is represented by an emphatic negative polarity item (E-NPI), as in the following example: (1) *The fog is so thick (that) you* ***can't see your hand in front of your face. (EN)/ Der Nebel ist so dicht, dass man die Hand nicht vor den Augen sehen kann. (GER)*** I intend to test experimentally whether there is an interaction between a complete exhaustification -- i.e., endorsing the strongest alternative within the set of alternatives contributed by the E-NPI, which would reflect the speakers' tendency of applying pragmatic strengthening -- and the processing of upper bound high degree readings of the primary predicates. I hypothesise that the difference between the high degree vs**.** relatively high degree readings of the adjectives occurring in RCXs depends on whether the negated minimizer in the RCl is perceived as complete exhaustification -- i.e., contributing the strongest claim within the set of alternatives vs. non-complete exhaustification -- i.e., making a relatively strong claim.

Data. In utterances such as (1), two scalar inferences concur in deriving the intensity readings: the use, in the RCl, of a minimizer, which corresponds to the speaker's subjectively defined low degree, can be, first, pragmatically strengthened under negation to express an endpoint on a contextually salient scale; second, an indirect scalar implicature is responsible for the high degree reading of the adjective in the matrix: *the lower the degree of the result represented by the negated minimizer, the higher the intensity of the quality emphasized* or, in other words, if the intensity of a quality results in something that is emphatic and low on a contextual scale, this intensity is interpreted as high.

In particular, the negated minimizer i.e., NOT+ the minimum action that for the speaker counts as an event of seeing **--** *see your hand in front of your face* **--** can be pragmatically strengthened to implicate that one *can see nothing at all* (i.e., from the *minimum something* to *absolutely nothing*, on a visibility scale); this process would correspond to endorsing, in the experimental task, the *utmost low point* on the scale -- that is, the *strongest endpoint-denoting scale-mate*, which would translate in interpreting the proposition in the RCl as 'there is an extremely low degree of visibility'. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that some speakers can trigger an implicature that would be *close to (i.e., not corresponding to) the scalar endpoint*. Therefore, even if they would endorse a strong scale-mate, this would not be the lowest bound. This would reflect in interpreting the proposition in the RCl as 'one can see almost nothing at all' or 'there is a quite/pretty low degree of visibility'.

The assumption is that this choice is largely depending on the set of alternatives that the speaker conceives on the (here, visibility) scale -- see (2), and on whether the minimizer is perceived as the *strongest i.e., most emphatic claim possible.* To explain, a minimizer NPI makes a set of alternatives accessible – here, ranges of visibility. Consequently, when the NPI is used in an RCl, the result clause makes an emphatic statement with respect to a contextually relevant set, namely the alternatives provided by the NPI: (1) could also be rephrased as (2), with other E-NPIs or just regular emphatic negative statements: (2) *The fog is* ***so thick that you can't see <u>your hand in front of your face/within a step/two steps ahead/ whithin half a meter</u>***, etc. However, what is perceived as *the most emphatic* statement largely depends on a subjectively-defined threshold varying with the speaker. *Fog so thick you can't see within half a meter,* which, on its purely semantic meaning, seems to indicate a *less low visibility* in comparison to the alternatives formulated in (2) could, for some speakers, still imply that 'there is absolutely no visibility at all', that is, to make the *strongest claim.*

Experiment. An initial experiment will test the hypothesis that there is an interaction between (i) speakers' decision whether to apply pragmatic strengthening in the proposition in the RCl and (ii) the endorsement of the strongest scale-mate, representing the degree of the adjective in the matrix -- that is, whether in the constructions where the adjective and the negated minimizer are represented in a cause-result relation in discourse, the interpretation of the degree of the adjective -- as 'extreme/high degree' vs. 'relatively high degree '-- is correlated to whether the negated minimizer expression in the RCl is associated by the subjects to 'the strongest possible claim' (i.e., to an absolute endpoint on a contextually salient scale), or to 'strong, but not strongest' claims.

In another experiment, we intend to verify if, for an individual minimizer NPI, there are specific degree RCXs -- within the set of its admitted collocations with degree adjectives and nouns modified by the respective adjectives -- where speakers consistently (i.e., significantly) expect the strongest claim possible while 'clearly excluding' less strong claims.

Relevance. The experimental research on the interaction between the syntactic pattern of degree result clause constructions with negated minimizers aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the different inferences involved in the processing of high degree vs. relatively high degree readings of adjectives and will potentially provide new insights on the scalar analyses of negative polarity.

Reference

Gotzner, Nicole, Anton Benz & Stephanie Solt. 2018. Scalar diversity, negative strengthening and adjectival semantics. Frontiers in Psychology, Art. 1659.