

Remarks on the interpretation of negated absolute adjectives

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Absolute adjectives (*open/closed*), in contrast with relative adjectives (*tall/short*), are said to behave symmetrically, the negation of one form entailing the assertion of the other (Kennedy and McNally 2005, Kennedy 2007). However, Paradis and Willners (2006) showed that the entailments do not always hold, four asymmetric patterns being identified in Swedish. The asymmetries are attributed to the scaling potential the absolute adjectives acquire contextually.

This paper aims at investigating the profiles of negated absolute adjectives in Romanian. Based on the assumption that the weaker sentential negation *nu A* ‘not A’ may be used as a substitute for a stronger option, a judgement test was designed, in which the interpretation of *nu A* ‘not A’ (*not healthy*) is tested against the affixal negation *neA* ‘unA’ (*unhealthy*), *non-A* (*non-healthy*) and the antonym *B* (*ill*). This may prove useful as the negative affixes and polar antonyms have different encodings, pointing to different places on the scale. While *nu* ‘not’ usually denotes the entire negative part of the scale, the antonym *B* denotes the absolute end of the scale and *ne-* ‘un-’ usually gives rise to scalar negative compounds, denoting an intermediate position on the scale. The lexicalization of the antonym *B* was a prerequisite for this study, while this was not necessary for the negative compounds. Supported by preliminary testing, our hypothesis is that when the polar opposite *B* of an absolute adjective is lexicalised, the negative compound *neA* ‘unA’ is not strengthened to the meaning of the antonym. We predict that if the participants choose the *neA* compound as the intended interpretation for *nu A* ‘not A’, regardless whether the negative compound is lexicalised or not, then the adjectives have no longer equivalent meanings, but they display some relative-like features.

The results confirm the asymmetric behaviour, the profiles of the adjectives showing different degrees of scalarity, displayed on a continuum ranging from having no scaling potential to having a strong or weak relative-like interpretation. Accordingly, three main categories of adjectives have emerged: absolute, relative-like and adjectives that can be either absolute or relative. In sum, the results show variation among the absolute adjectives as a class but also inside the mentioned subclasses. Furthermore, the adjectives do not seem to cluster in pairs but rather independently. Although only a few negative compounds are lexicalized, the participants have supplied the non-lexicalised compounds in order to fill in the gap between *nu A* ‘not A’ and the polar opposite *B*.

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References: Kennedy, Christopher & Louise McNally (2005). Scale structure and the semantic typology of gradable predicates. *Language* 81(2), 345–381. Kennedy, Christopher (2007). Vagueness and grammar: the semantics of relative and absolute gradable adjectives. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30, 1–45. Paradis, Carita & Caroline Willners (2006). Antonymy and negation – The boundedness hypothesis. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38, 1051–1080.