

What children's interpretation of gradable adjectives can tell us about language variation

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Investigating the interpretation of gradable adjectives in first language acquisition, our study provides evidence for the cross-linguistic variation of gradability. Beck et al. (2009) propose three dependent parameters to account for the variation attested across languages; the most fundamental one is the Degree Semantics Parameter (DSP) in (1).

(1) A language {does/does not} have gradable predicates (type $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ and related).

In [+DSP]-languages, gradable predicates denote relations between individuals and degrees (type $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$). In [-DSP]-languages, gradable predicates denote vague predicates (type $\langle e, t \rangle$).

Following Snyder (2007), changes in children's grammar during acquisition can inform us about the nature of parameters: the child's hypothesis space regarding the grammar of the target language is assumed to be restricted to the options permitted by the range of the existing parameters. Extending research on the use of comparison constructions (Hohaus et al. 2014), we investigated whether German-speaking adults' and children's (age: 3–5 years) interpretation patterns of the positive form of gradable predicates provide support for the DSP parameter. Participants saw series of objects with small size differences and had to respond to test prompts such as *Give me the {big/small} water balloons*. Two analyses based on a total of 552 responses were performed to test whether the participants' ordering was based on big vs. small objects as in [-DSP]-languages or whether it was based on degrees as in [+DSP]-languages. First, we examined how participants divided the object array. Second, we investigated whether the participants' judgements for *big/small* were context-sensitive. Findings of the first analysis suggest that all participants establish an ordering among the objects that results in a set of big and a set of small objects. Findings of the second analysis suggest that the 3-year-olds, but not the 4- and 5-year-olds, adjusted their judgements less often than the adults.

How can this developmental pattern be explained? We argue that at age 3, children interpret gradable adjectives as properties of individuals, just as in [-DSP]-languages, but that starting at age 4 they take gradable adjectives to express relations between individuals and degrees, just as in [+DSP]-languages. In summary, the notion that 'gradability' varies cross-linguistically seems to be mirrored in the child's acquisition path. If correct, degrees are predicted to enter the child's grammar in the same way as has been proposed for language change: paths, i.e., totally ordered sets of locations, initiate scales, i.e., totally ordered sets of degrees (see Hohaus 2018 for language change).

References: Beck, S. et al. (2009). Crosslinguistic Variation in Comparison Constructions. In O. Percus et al. (Eds.), *Linguistic Variation Yearbook 9*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1–66. Hohaus, V. (2018). How do Degrees Enter the Grammar? Language Change in Samoan from [-DSP] to [+DSP]. In E. Bogal-Allbritten & E. Coppock, *Proceedings of TripleA 4*, 106–120. Hohaus, V., Tiemann, S. & S. Beck (2014). Acquisition of Comparison Constructions. *Language Acquisition* 21, 215–249. Snyder, W. (2007). *Child Language*. Oxford: OUP.