Excellent is actually not the most excellent inference generator: gradable adjectives in ironic contexts

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In the past decade, gradable adjectives have become the focus of experimental pragmatic research. Originally proposed to invoke Horn scales (Horn 1972), gradable adjectives seem to work different than other expressions that do so. While modals like *might* (e.g. Noveck 2001) and quantifiers like *some* (Noveck 2001, Huang & Snedeker 2009, Degen & Tanenhaus 2015, to name but a few) generate scalar inferences, gradable adjectives that denote the middle of the scale like *warm* do not always generate the inference *not hot* (Doran et al. 2009, Beltrama & Xiang 2012, van Tiel et al. (2016)). However, these results are confined to non-ironic contexts. The present paper seeks to investigate the inferential behaviour of gradable adjectives in irony-inducing contexts.

Informal observations of irony in naturally occurring environments suggest that "extreme adjectives", i.e. adjectives denoting the end of a scale (Cruse 1986) bring about a pragmatic effect (in the sense of Colston 2015) that is stronger than adjectives denoting the middle of the scale. In other words, (1) is conceived of as more ironic than (2) when used in irony-inducing contexts:

(1)   That is excellent.

(2)   That is good.

To find evidence for this observation, a rating study was designed. The experimental stimuli of the study included a context involving at least two people, which ended in an ironic utterance made by one of these. These utterances had the format PRO BE ADJ_{grad} and were manipulated with regard to the gradable adjective that occurred therein (high, middle, or low on the scale). The participants in the study were asked to rate this utterance on a 7-point irony scale. The rating study was complemented by a discourse completion task in order to assess the inferences that were drawn. The discourses were composed of contextual information about the setting and the participants, followed by an exchange between them. The exchange always consisted of three parts: (a) Person A makes an ironic comment about a state of affairs mentioned in the context using a gradable adjective to convey the criticism. (b) Person B seeks clarification. (c) Person A provides a clarification which partially has to be formulated by the participants of the study. (3) illustrates the task:

(3)   *Peter is afraid of spiders. One day, there is a spider in his bathroom. He starts screaming and runs to his roommate Christopher for help. Christopher enters the bathroom.*

      Christopher: Wow, that one is huge!
      Peter: Really?
      Christopher: No, Peter. It is _____

A test run of the experiment with 21 German students of English (non-native speakers of English but highly proficient) and a handful of stimuli showed that ironic comments

including an extreme adjective were indeed rated higher (m = 5.95) than those including a middle term (m = 5.43) but this difference did not reach a significant level (t = 0.93, p = 0.18). Interestingly, the test run of the discourse completion task (same participants) revealed that there is a tendency (63.5% of all cases) to use either an extreme adjective (like *tiny* in (3) above) or an intensifier plus a middle term (like *very small*). This leads to the assumption that the implied meaning of the ironic use of an extreme adjective comes close to the most distant opposite. The experiment proper including native speakers of English is currently in progress.

References

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