

Positive Standards of Comparison*

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1. Introduction

Research on the semantics of gradable adjectives has, among others, the following two preoccupations: the nature of the degree-comparison relation expressed by the degree morphology (*more/-er, less, etc.*) and the way in which the standard of comparison is expressed. Here I wish to examine a combination of these two elements that has not, to the best of my knowledge, been described before. In particular, I will examine an English adjective construction in which the gradable adjective appears in the positive degree and the standard of comparison is specified overtly by an infinitival relative clause. The construction is of interest in part because it shows a novel way in which standards may be expressed with positives. Its behavior also supports a recent proposal by Kennedy (2007) about the effect of semantic scale structure on default standards for positives. It thus sheds important new light on the ways in which standards are determined for positives, and in turn on the semantics of gradability more generally.

The construction of interest is shown in (1); I call it the nominal attributive-with-infinitive construction (nominal AIC). A major focus of discussion will be the relationship between nominal AICs and the more well-known gradable adjective constructions shown in (2), the positive and comparative.

- | | | |
|-----|--|-------------|
| (1) | <i>Middlemarch</i> is a long book (for the teacher) to assign. | NOMINAL AIC |
| (2) | a. <i>Middlemarch</i> is a long book. | POSITIVE |
| | b. <i>Middlemarch</i> is a longer book than <i>Emma</i> (is). | COMPARATIVE |

We can immediately observe that nominal AICs appear to have properties of both positives and comparatives. The nominal AIC in (1) contains a gradable adjective in the morphologically unmarked positive degree, just like the ordinary positive in (2a); it also

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contains a phrase that appears to express a standard of comparison, much like the finite *than* clause in the comparative in (2b). I will argue that nominal AICs, though they contain a positive degree head instead of the comparative *-er*, have the basic structure of comparatives, with the infinitival relative occupying the same syntactic position as a finite *than* clause in an ordinary comparative.

I also note at the outset a puzzling restriction on the adjectives that are allowed in nominal AICs. Not all gradable adjectives may be used felicitously in the construction, as shown in (3).

- (3) a. That is an old car to drive across the country.
b. #That is a dry sponge to clean the counter with.

An explanation for this restriction will be proposed in section 4. First, in section 2 I discuss the evidence in favor of treating nominal AICs as comparison constructions, and in section 3 I sketch a compositional syntax and semantics for the construction.

Finally, a terminological note: I use the term “nominal AIC” in order to distinguish the construction from others that contain an attributive adjective with an infinitival relative clause following the noun. In particular, nominal AICs must not be confused with clausal AICs; a basic paradigm is given in (4) and (5).

- (4) NOMINAL AIC
a. *Middlemarch* is a long book to assign.
b. #It is long to assign *Middlemarch*.
- (5) CLAUSAL AIC
a. *Middlemarch* is a bad book to assign.
b. It is bad to assign *Middlemarch*.

The terms refer to the apparent semantic scope of the attributive adjective: in nominal AICs, the adjective directly modifies the adjacent noun, while in clausal AICs, it modifies not the noun but the following infinitival clause, as confirmed by the availability of the impersonal paraphrase in (5b) (i.e., *Middlemarch* itself need not be bad, in any relevant sense, for (5a) to be true). I refer the reader to Fleisher (2008, to appear) for an analysis of clausal AICs and for more detailed discussion of the differences between the two constructions.

2. Nominal AICs as Comparison Constructions

I begin with a basic semantic intuition: in a sentence like (6), we understand that a comparison is being made between the length of *Middlemarch* and some relevant standard of length:

- (6) *Middlemarch* is a long book to assign.

Refining this intuition, we may say that the comparison is one in which the length of *Middlemarch* exceeds the relevant standard; there is a clear sense in (6) that *Middlemarch* is too long for present purposes. We may further say that those purposes have to do with

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assigning books: more precisely, with the appropriate length of books that one can or should reasonably assign. In (6), then, our intuition is that *Middlemarch*'s length exceeds the standard of length for books that one can reasonably assign. Mapping these meaning components onto the grammatical structure, we see that the degree to which the subject possesses the property denoted by the attributive adjective exceeds a standard having to do with the content of the infinitival clause.

This grammatical description suggests a strong similarity between nominal AICs like (6) and comparatives. In a comparative construction like (7), the subject (*Middlemarch*) possesses the property denoted by the attributive adjective (*long*) to a degree that exceeds a standard having to do with the *than* clause.

(7) *Middlemarch* is a longer book than *Emma* is.

Our basic semantic intuition, translated into a basic grammatical description, thus reveals a close connection between nominal AICs and comparatives.

This connection is supported by a number of additional facts, all of which suggest that nominal AICs have the structure of comparatives, with the infinitival relative providing the standard of comparison. First, observe that nominal AICs may not occur in the comparative degree. The addition of comparative morphology and a *than* clause takes away the interpretation of inappropriateness that is characteristic of nominal AICs: in (8a), we lose the sense that *Ulysses* is inappropriately long for the purpose at hand. This is explained if nominal AICs already have the structure of comparatives; as shown in (8b), nesting one comparative inside another leads to infelicity.

- (8) a. #*Ulysses* is a longer book to assign than *Middlemarch* is.
b. #*Ulysses* is a less longer book than *Middlemarch* is than *Clarissa* is.

Second, nominal AICs are incompatible with measure phrases. In an ordinary positive like *Bob is a six-foot-tall man*, the measure phrase *six-foot* denotes the standard of comparison to which Bob's height is compared. In a nominal AIC with a measure phrase, both the measure phrase and the infinitival relative denote standards of comparison, leading to a semantic clash between the two standards. The inappropriateness reading that is characteristic of nominal AICs disappears under these circumstances:

- (9) a. #*Middlemarch* is a 700-page-long book to assign.
b. #That's a 20-year-old car to drive across the country.

Third, nominal AICs are incompatible with *how* questioning. In ordinary positives like *How long (of) a book is Middlemarch*, *how* questions the standard of length to which *Middlemarch*'s length is compared. In a nominal AIC with *how*, *how* questions the standard while the infinitival relative provides the standard. This simultaneous provision and questioning of the standard of comparison leads to infelicity (i.e., to a loss of the inappropriateness reading):

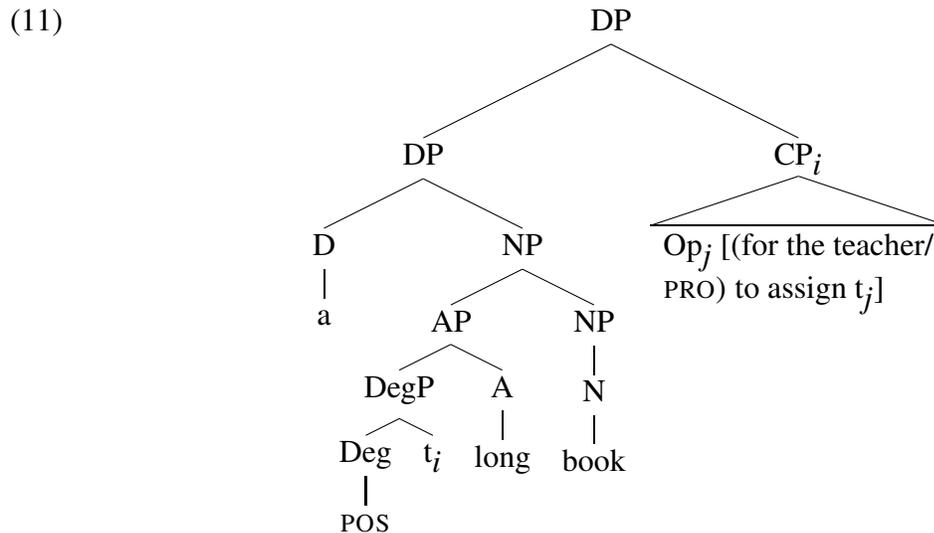
- (10) #How long (of) a book to assign is *Middlemarch*?

The phenomena in (8), (9), and (10) are readily explained if nominal AICs are comparison constructions in which the infinitival relative clause provides the standard of comparison. In the next section, I develop a compositional syntax and semantics for nominal AICs that takes these facts into account.

3. Nominal-AIC Syntax and Semantics

The factor most obviously at issue in the syntactic analysis of nominal AICs is the status of the infinitival clause. The proposal here will focus on both the external and the internal syntax of this clause, and on providing a semantics for interpreting the proposed structure.

With regard to their external syntax, I suggest that nominal-AIC infinitival clauses are just like the finite *than* clauses of ordinary attributive comparatives. I follow the traditional analysis of such clauses, which dates at least to Bresnan (1973), and propose that the infinitival clause is merged as the complement of Deg⁰, the degree head, which in this case is the positive morpheme, POS (Kennedy 1999, 2007). Like finite *than* clauses, nominal-AIC infinitival clauses undergo rightward extraposition to reach their surface position. I assume that DegP sits in SpecAP for attributive adjectives (Abney 1987, 335ff.). The structure is sketched in (11).



This analysis draws its inspiration from the similarities between nominal AICs and comparatives suggested by the data in section 2. In addition, it inherits a strength of the traditional analysis of comparatives, namely the ability to account straightforwardly for the selectional relationship between Deg⁰ and its complement. Whereas the Deg⁰ heads *more/-er* and *less* select finite *than* clauses, and *as* selects finite *as* clauses, we can propose that the Deg⁰ head POS selects infinitival clauses. The non-existence of nominal AICs with finite clauses after the noun can then be accounted for simply as a matter of POS's subcategorization.

The internal syntax of the infinitival clause is somewhat more complicated. As in finite *than* clauses, there is always an A'-extraction gap in the infinitival clause of a nominal

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AIC, as witnessed by its sensitivity to islands of various strengths:

- (12) a. *Middlemarch* is a long book to expect the students to read _.
b. ?*Middlemarch* is a long book to wonder whether the students will read _.
c. **Middlemarch* is a long book for an essay about _ to be interesting.

Unlike in ordinary comparatives, however, the A' gap in a nominal AIC is always and only the size of DP. The absence of gaps smaller than DP is to be expected, given that nominal AICs are attributive adjective constructions. As Kennedy and Merchant (2000) show in detail, attributive comparatives do not permit the DegP- or AP-sized gaps typically found in predicative comparatives (i.e., they do not allow the processes Bresnan (1973) calls comparative deletion and comparative subdeletion). Kennedy and Merchant explain this restriction—and, more generally, all violations of the Left-Branch Condition of Ross (1967)—as a failure of interpretability at the PF interface. Meanwhile, the absence of gaps larger than DP in nominal AICs can be attributed to the unavailability of an independent syntactic operation, like VP ellipsis, that would create such a gap. Nominal-AIC infinitival clauses occur only inside predicative DPs, and so there is typically no antecedent VP to license VP ellipsis. There are thus reasonable explanations for the absence of both gaps smaller than DP and gaps larger than DP in nominal AICs.

There remains, however, the difficulty of dealing with gaps exactly the size of DP in attributive comparatives, and by extension in nominal AICs. The problem is as follows: under standard assumptions about the interpretation of the comparative clause (i.e., finite *than* clause or nominal-AIC infinitival clause), it is natural to propose that the A' operator that induces abstraction over the clause is the size of DegP. Following Kennedy and Merchant (2000), we may assume that movement of this operator to the embedded SpecCP position must proceed through SpecDP, which in turn requires that there be a D⁰ with a [+wh] feature specification to match that of the moved operator. In English, which lacks such a [+wh] D⁰, the DP from which the operator is extracted must itself be eliminated from the syntactic representation before the derivation reaches the PF interface in order to avoid a crash. Unfortunately, as Kennedy and Merchant (2000, 115) observe, “there is no independent ellipsis operation in English that targets DPs.” Their solution is a pied-piping analysis, in which DP-sized gaps “are derived by raising the entire DP in which the comparative operator originates to SpecCP and deleting it under identity with the DP in the matrix clause” (Kennedy and Merchant 2000, 115). Here again there is a problem, however: the structure to be deleted is properly contained within the structure under identity with which it is purported to delete. Note that we cannot appeal to quantifier raising, the standard antecedent-contained deletion remedy, as QR is a canonical LF operation and the antecedent containment problem in this case originates on the PF branch of the derivation.

In view of these problems, I propose a simplified internal syntactic analysis of nominal-AIC infinitival clauses. Specifically, I suggest that the DP-sized gap is created by an A' operator that is the size of DP, not DegP. This syntactic simplification naturally comes at the cost of some semantic complication, as we will see shortly. Nonetheless, I believe that the syntactic problems caused by assuming a DegP operator are more dire. The tree in (11) thus represents both the external and the internal syntax of the infinitival clause,

with the A' operator originating in a DP position within that clause.

For the semantics, I follow the measure-function approach to gradability developed by Kennedy (1999), in which gradable adjectives denote functions of type $\langle e, d \rangle$. I further assume that the Deg^0 head, POS, with which the gradable adjective combines in a nominal AIC denotes a ‘significantly greater than’ relation, symbolized below as $>!$. In this I follow Fara (2000) and Kennedy (2007), who show how this denotation helps to eliminate problems stemming from the classical inferential fallacy known as the Sorites Paradox. A basic semantic representation for the nominal AIC *Middlemarch is a long book to assign* is shown in (13).

$$(13) \quad \llbracket \text{Middlemarch is a long book to assign.} \rrbracket = \mathbf{long}(M) >! \text{STND}_{\text{assign}} \wedge \mathbf{book}(M)$$

According to the structure in (13), the nominal AIC is interpreted as meaning that *Middlemarch*’s length exceeds a standard having to do with assignments ($\text{STND}_{\text{assign}}$) and that *Middlemarch* is a book. In the remainder of this section I discuss a more detailed characterization of the standard of comparison, $\text{STND}_{\text{assign}}$, and present a proposal for how to build the meaning in (13) compositionally from the syntactic structure of the sentence.

Most important for our characterization of the standard of comparison is that it make reference not only to the content of the infinitival clause, but to the matrix adjective and noun meanings, as well. In our poster example, *Middlemarch is a long book to assign*, the standard of comparison is the standard of length for books that can be, should be, or typically are assigned. It is not enough, for example, simply to refer to the standard of length for assigning things in general. If we consider an example like *Squeaky is a big mouse to keep in a shoebox*, it becomes clear that we are dealing not with a standard of size for things in general, but with a standard of size for mice. Thus, the matrix adjective and the matrix noun meanings both must find their way into the description of the standard.

This could be straightforwardly accomplished if we had a DegP -sized operator. In such an analysis, we could represent the requisite adjective and noun directly in the syntax of the infinitival clause, as in (14).

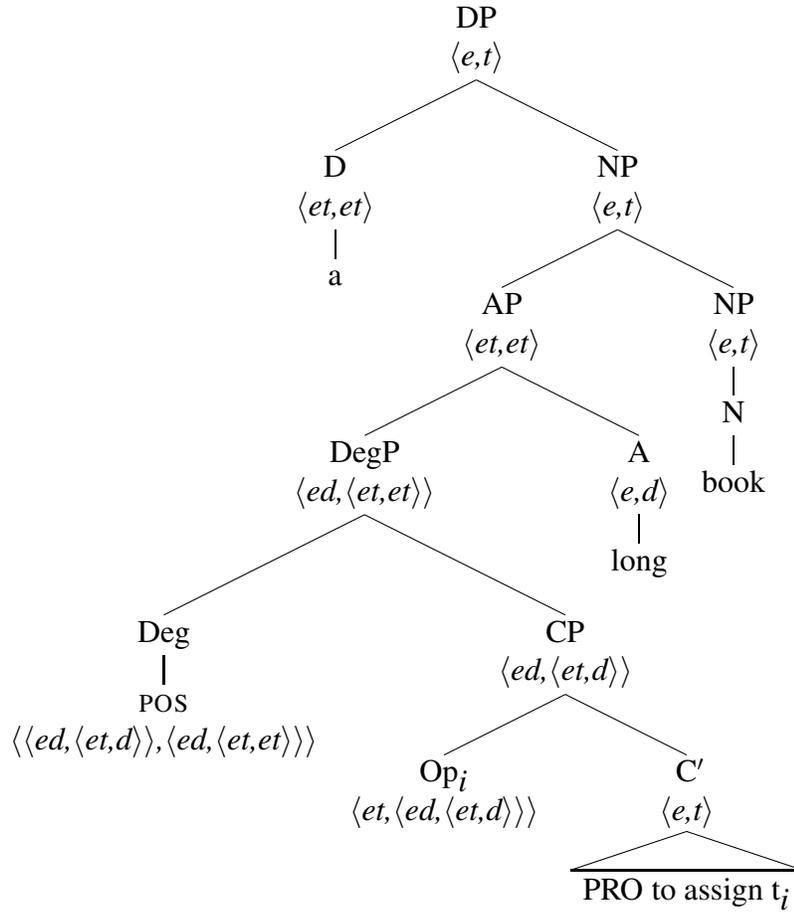
$$(14) \quad \text{Middlemarch is a long book } [_{\text{CP}} \text{Op}_i \text{ to assign a } t_j \text{ long book}].$$

The trouble with such an analysis, as discussed above, is that I know of no syntactically plausible way in which the lower-clause DP can be deleted at the PF interface.

The solution I propose is to build these semantic components into the denotation of the DP-sized operator. The matrix adjective and noun meanings can then be used to compute the standard of comparison via simple functional application. I begin by presenting the basic lexical denotations of the DP operator and of the Deg^0 head POS in (15); a precedent for such complex denotations can be found in Kennedy’s (1999, 145) treatment of comparative deletion. The type composition of the entire predicative DP of the nominal AIC is shown in (16). (I follow Heim and Kratzer (1998, 62) in treating the indefinite article of a predicative DP as an identity function on properties.)

$$(15) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } \llbracket \text{Op} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle e, t \rangle} \lambda G_{\langle e, d \rangle} \lambda Q_{\langle e, t \rangle} . \text{MAX}(\lambda d . \exists x [P(x) \wedge Q(x) \wedge G(x) \geq d]) \\ \text{b. } \llbracket \text{POS} \rrbracket = \lambda \mathcal{C}_{\langle ed, \langle et, d \rangle \rangle} \lambda G_{\langle e, d \rangle} \lambda N_{\langle e, t \rangle} \lambda x e . G(x) >! \mathcal{C}(G)(N) \wedge N(x) \end{array}$$

(16)



As can be seen from the tree in (16), the operator composes with the C' constituent after moving to SpecCP. I assume that the operator leaves a trace of type e and abstracts over its trace, making C' a constituent of type $\langle e, t \rangle$. The Deg^0 head, POS, composes with CP and then with the matrix adjective and noun. The lexical entries given for the operator and POS in (15) ensure that the adjective and noun meanings are passed into the description of the standard of comparison (i.e., the argument of the maximality operator MAX, which returns a definite description of a degree; von Stechow 1984, Rullmann 1995). The internal semantic composition of CP is shown in (17), and the composition of the entire structure is shown in (18).

(NB: The lexical entries for *long* and *book* are straightforward; keep in mind that the former is of type $\langle e, d \rangle$, the latter of type $\langle e, t \rangle$. Two additional notes are in order. First, I represent the arbitrary PRO subject of the infinitival clause with the free variable z in the expressions below. Second, I abbreviate the modality of the infinitival clause with the notation **to-assign**. I assume, following Hackl and Nissenbaum (2003), that infinitival relatives are associated with a future-oriented modality. The notation **to-assign**(x)(y) can thus be read as a shorthand for the modalized expression $\exists w \in \text{FUT-MOD: assign}(w)(x)(y).$)

$$(17) \quad \llbracket \text{CP} \rrbracket = \llbracket \text{Op}_i \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{C}' \rrbracket) = \\ \lambda G_{\langle e, d \rangle} \lambda Q_{\langle e, t \rangle} \cdot \text{MAX}(\lambda d. \exists x [\text{to-assign}(x)(z) \wedge Q(x) \wedge G(x) \geq d])$$

$$(18) \quad \llbracket \text{POS} \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{CP} \rrbracket) (\llbracket \text{A} \rrbracket) (\llbracket \text{NP} \rrbracket) = \\ \lambda x e. \mathbf{long}(x) > ! \text{MAX}(\lambda d. \exists y [\mathbf{to-assign}(y)(z) \wedge \mathbf{book}(y) \wedge \mathbf{long}(y) \geq d]) \wedge \mathbf{book}(x)$$

The expression in (18) represents the predicative DP that composes with the matrix subject, *Middlemarch*. When these two elements are composed, the resulting meaning is as follows: ‘*Middlemarch* is a book and the degree of *Middlemarch*’s length significantly exceeds the maximum degree of length d such that one can reasonably assign something that is a book and that is (at least) d -long’.

Our analysis has successfully incorporated the matrix adjective and noun meanings into the computation of the standard of comparison in a completely compositional way. Note that (18) is simply an updated, more detailed version of our original semantic representation for the nominal AIC in (13). Our old place-holder representation for the standard of comparison, $\text{STND}_{\text{assign}}$, has now been replaced by the more precise characterization, $\text{MAX}(\lambda d. \exists y [\mathbf{to-assign}(y)(z) \wedge \mathbf{book}(y) \wedge \mathbf{long}(y) \geq d])$. Now that we have seen how the standard of comparison is computed in nominal AICs, we may turn our attention to the interaction between these standards and the default standards of comparison associated with positive gradable adjectives of various types.

4. Nominal AICs and Scale Structure

In this section I discuss the behavior of different classes of gradable adjectives in nominal AICs. In particular, there is a split in acceptability among certain subclasses of what Kennedy (2007) calls “relative” and “absolute” gradable adjectives. I show here that nominal AICs are compatible only with gradable adjectives that point to an open end of a semantic scale, and propose that this is because nominal AICs fail to satisfy the truth conditions of adjectives that point to closed scale ends. This finding supports Kennedy’s (2007) analysis of the relative–absolute split and his proposal for how default standards of comparison are determined for positive gradable adjectives of each class.

Much recent work in adjectival semantics has been focused on establishing a semantic typology of gradable adjectives. A significant locus of variation among adjectives is the structure of the semantic scales with which they are associated: the scale of height or physical extent for *tall*, the scale of moistness for *dry*, and so on. Rotstein and Winter (2004) and Kennedy and McNally (2005) catalog behavioral differences between adjectives whose scales are open at both ends and those whose scales are closed at one or both ends. In the terminology of Kennedy (2007), the former are relative adjectives, the latter absolute adjectives.

Relative and absolute adjectives are distinguished not only by their scale structure, but also by the way in which their standards of comparison are determined when they occur in the positive degree, i.e., when they are combined with the Deg^0 head POS. Relative adjectives with POS are interpreted with a contextually determined standard of comparison, as in (19a), where the standard may vary depending on the context of utterance and the attitudes of the interlocutors. Absolute adjectives fall into two subcategories, termed “minimum standard” and “maximum standard” absolute adjectives by Kennedy (2007, 21ff.). In the positive degree, minimum standard absolute adjectives take as their standard of compar-

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ison the bare minimum amount of the gradable property in question; in (19b) (Kennedy's (33b)), the standard is a minimal (i.e., non-zero) degree of moistness. Maximum standard absolute adjectives have as their standard the maximum amount of the gradable property in question, e.g., a full amount of purity in (19c) (Kennedy's (34c)).

- | | | | |
|------|----|--------------------|---------------------------|
| (19) | a. | Bob is tall. | RELATIVE |
| | b. | The table is wet. | MINIMUM STANDARD ABSOLUTE |
| | c. | The water is pure. | MAXIMUM STANDARD ABSOLUTE |

Rotstein and Winter (2004) and Kennedy and McNally (2005) show that adjectives of the different classes in (19) may be differentiated based in part on which adverbs may be used to modify them. They also use entailment tests to demonstrate the validity of their generalizations about the value of the standard of comparison. The three classes listed above license the three different entailments shown in (20), confirming the claims cited above about how the standard of comparison is determined in each case. In these examples, a comparative clause with *more/-er* is used to reason about the validity of a positive with POS.

- | | | |
|------|----|---|
| (20) | a. | Bob is taller than Susan. \rightarrow Bob/Susan is tall. |
| | b. | The table is wetter than the floor. \rightarrow The table is wet. |
| | c. | Bob's water is more pure than Susan's water. \rightarrow Susan's water is not pure. |

In (20a), the relative adjective *tall* is used, and so we are unable to determine from the *more/-er* comparison whether either Bob or Susan counts as tall according to the contextually determined standard used with POS. With the minimum standard absolute adjective *wet* in (20b), by contrast, the *more/-er* comparison tells us that, at the very least, the table has a non-zero degree of moistness; it thus follows that it has more moistness than the standard of comparison used with POS, which is the minimum amount of the property in question. Similarly, with the maximum standard absolute adjective *pure* in (20c), the *more/-er* comparison tells us unambiguously that Susan's water is not completely pure; it is therefore safe for us to conclude that it does not meet the standard used with POS, which has as its value the maximal degree of purity.

We may also take into consideration the interaction between semantic scales and adjectival polarity. While "positive" gradable adjectives measure intervals between the minimum extreme of a scale and some other point, "negative" gradable adjectives measure intervals between the maximum extreme and another point. Gradable adjectives tend to come in positive–negative pairs: e.g., *dirty* is positive and *clean* is negative on the scale of dirtiness; *wet* is positive and *dry* is negative on the scale of moistness; and so on. If, for a given pair, the positive adjective is a minimum standard absolute adjective, then the negative adjective is a maximum standard absolute adjective, and vice versa.¹ Thus, with POS, the standard of comparison for *wet* is a minimal amount of moistness, while the standard of comparison for its polar opposite *dry* is the maximal amount of dryness, i.e., a total absence of moistness. Similarly, while the standard of comparison for the maximum standard

¹The exception is adjectives associated with scales that are closed at both ends. For these, adjectives of both polarities are maximum standard absolute adjectives.

absolute adjective *pure* is a maximal amount of purity, the standard for its polar opposite, the minimum standard absolute adjective *impure*, is a minimal amount of impurity—i.e., a lack of complete purity—when it occurs with POS.

Having established the categories of gradable adjectives mentioned here, we can investigate their behavior in nominal AICs. In particular, as nominal AICs involve both the Deg⁰ head POS and a phrase (the infinitival clause) that provides a standard of comparison, how do nominal AICs behave when they contain absolute gradable adjectives? The answer is that, while relative and minimum standard absolute adjectives are able to occur in nominal AICs, maximum standard absolute adjectives are not. The nominal-AIC examples in previous sections have all contained relative adjectives; examples of minimum and maximum absolute adjectives are shown in (21) and (22), respectively.

(21) MINIMUM STANDARD ABSOLUTES:

- a. That is a wet table to put a computer on.
- b. Those are dirty pants to wear to the reception.
- c. Telegraph is a bumpy road to drive your sports car on.

(22) MAXIMUM STANDARD ABSOLUTES:

- a. #That is a dry sponge to clean the counter with.
- b. #Those are clean pants to paint your house in.
- c. #That is a flat surface to trip and fall on.

The crucial semantic generalization that distinguishes relative and minimum standard absolute adjectives from maximum standard absolute adjectives—and that therefore may help explain their acceptability contrast in nominal AICs—is that only the former denote intervals that “point to” an open end of a scale. Relative gradable adjectives are associated with scales that are unbounded (i.e., open) at both ends: there is no maximal amount of either the positive or the negative adjective associated with such a scale. Absolute adjectives, by contrast, are associated with scales that are bounded/closed at (at least) one end. When the lower end of the scale is closed and the upper end open, we get positive adjectives (measuring intervals from the lower end to some point) that are minimum standard absolutes and negative adjectives (measuring intervals from the upper end to some point) that are maximum standard absolutes. When the upper end is closed and the lower end open, the positive adjectives are maximum standard absolutes and the negative adjectives minimum standard absolutes. Finally, when both ends are closed, we get maximum standard absolute adjectives of both polarities.

If it is true that nominal AICs allow only gradable adjectives that point to an open end of a scale, then we can make precise predictions about the acceptability of adjectives associated with particular scale types. I summarize the predictions in (23). Scale types are depicted with their lower ends on the left and upper ends on the right; unfilled circles indicate open ends, while filled circles indicate closed ends.

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(23) Adjective acceptability in nominal AICs by scale type and adjectival polarity:

Scale type	Positive adjective	Negative adjective
○——○	Acceptable	Acceptable
●——○	Acceptable	Unacceptable
○——●	Unacceptable	Acceptable
●——●	Unacceptable	Unacceptable

The table in (23) is of course simply a more detailed representation of our generalization from above that nominal AICs do not allow maximum standard absolute adjectives. Every cell marked ‘unacceptable’ in (23) represents a maximum standard absolute adjective. The examples in (24) through (27) show nominal AICs with each type of adjective (for additional examples of each type, see Kennedy 2007, 34). The (a) examples contain positive adjectives, the (b) examples negative adjectives.

(24) Scale type: ○——○

- a. Bob is a tall guy to deny an exit row seat.
- b. Steve is a short guy for the Lakers to draft.

(25) Scale type: ●——○

- a. That is a wet towel to offer to a guest.
- b. #That is dry soil to grow tomatoes in.

(26) Scale type: ○——●

- a. #That is an accurate calculation to expect from a pocket calculator.
- b. That is an inaccurate calculation to base your results on.

(27) Scale type: ●——●

- a. #That is an opaque window to try to look through.
- b. #That is a transparent liquid to conceal the poison in.

The relative adjectives in (24) are fully acceptable, no matter their polarity. The absolute adjectives in (25) through (27) illustrate our generalization that only minimum standard absolute adjectives may occur in nominal AICs. While some might argue that the minimum standard absolute adjectives shown in (25a) and (26b) are not fully acceptable in nominal AICs, it seems clear that they are at least more acceptable than their maximum standard absolute counterparts in (25b), (26a), and (27). Together with the relative adjective facts in (24), this supports the generalization that gradable adjectives may occur in nominal AICs only when they point to an open end of a scale.

This effect appears to be due to a conflict of standards of comparison. When a maximum standard absolute adjective occurs in a nominal AIC, two standards are invoked: (i) the standard typically associated with the adjective when it occurs with POS (i.e., the maximum amount of the gradable property in question) and (ii) the standard denoted by the infinitival clause. Importantly, if the standard denoted by the infinitival clause is taken to be the actual standard for the sentence, then there is no guarantee that the subject possesses the maximum amount of the gradable property in question. This fact distinguishes

such sentences from nominal AICs with minimum standard absolute adjectives. These also involve the two standards specified above, though in this case the standard typically associated with the adjective is a minimal amount of the gradable property in question. If the infinitival clause standard is taken to be the actual standard, then we can be sure that the subject possesses at least a minimal amount of the relevant property. The conflict described above thus does not arise in these cases. The difference in entailment patterns is sketched in (28) for the minimum standard absolute adjective *wet* and the maximum standard absolute adjective *dry*.

- (28) a. That is a wet table to put a computer on. \rightarrow That is a wet table.
 b. That is a dry sponge to clean the counter with. \nrightarrow That is a dry sponge.

I suggest that the unacceptability of maximum standard absolute adjectives in nominal AICs is tied to the failure of the entailment in (28b). In order for an absolute adjective to be acceptable in a nominal AIC, the sentence (with its standard of comparison denoted by the infinitival clause) must guarantee the truth of the minimally different sentence in which the adjective combines with POS, but without any infinitival complement of POS. This generalization is consistent with the principle of INTERPRETIVE ECONOMY proposed by Kennedy (2007, 36), which states: “Maximize the contribution of the conventional meanings of the elements of a sentence to the computation of its truth conditions.” For adjectives associated with scales that are closed at one or both ends, the principle requires that they be interpreted as absolute adjectives. As seen in (28), nominal AICs with minimum standard absolute adjectives guarantee the truth of the absolute interpretation of the adjective,² while those with maximum standard absolute adjectives do not. The latter thus run afoul of interpretive economy and are unacceptable.

The data in this section show us that nominal AICs are a useful source of evidence for theories of gradability and comparison. The behavior of adjectives of different classes in nominal AICs shows how the semantics of POS interacts with the standard denoted by the infinitival clause and with the structure of the scale associated with the adjective. The generalizations adduced here further support the usefulness of the typology of scales proposed by Rotstein and Winter (2004) and Kennedy and McNally (2005).

5. Summary

The discussion above has addressed both empirical and theoretical issues. On the empirical side, I have provided a basic description of nominal AICs and some simple criteria for identifying them. I have proposed that, despite the fact that they contain gradable adjectives in the positive degree, nominal AICs are best classified as comparison constructions in which the infinitival relative clause has the external syntax of a finite *than* clause in an ordinary attributive comparative.

On the theoretical side, I have shown that nominal AICs provide a useful testing ground for theories of how standards of comparison are determined for positives. The way

²In fact, they typically say a bit more, as it is almost always the case that the standard denoted by the infinitival clause is greater than the minimal amount of the property in question.

Positive Standards of Comparison

in which the standard of comparison is computed in nominal AICs has not, to the best of my knowledge, previously been proposed for this or any other positive construction. It is striking to observe that the nominal-AIC data support the proposals made by Kennedy (2007) about default standards for positives. It is my hope that in future research the interaction between default standards and overtly specified standards can be investigated in more detail, and that the results described here can be more fully integrated into a theory of gradability and comparison.

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