THE STRUCTURE OF GRADABLE ADJECTIVES (GA)

For Kennedy & McNally (2005), the complementary distribution of Degree Modifiers (DMs) (table 1) is a probe for the scalar structure of adjectives; and for the context dependency of truth value judgments concerning sentences with adjectival predications. According to them, three DMs cover all types of GAs in English. "Much" specializes in GAs with partially closed scales; "well" selects exclusively GAs with totally closed scales; "very" modifies only GAs with totally open scales. The truth value of sentences with "very"+ GA is context dependent, while the truth value of sentences with "much" + GAs predication is context free. Those findings raise a question: is Kennedy and McNally's (2005) explanation for the distribution of DMs to be extended to all natural languages?

In Brazilian Portuguese (BP), three DMs outstand: "bem" (correlated to "well"), "muito" (correlated to "very") and "todo" (correlated to "much"). "Bem" shows two linked senses: a quality meaning, related to the adjective "bom" (good); and a degree/quantity meaning, related to the idea of a good amounted something. Example (1) shows only the degree/ a good amount reading; sentence (2) shows only the manner reading. "Muito" is precluded in the contexts that allow exclusively for the manner reading (4), because BP past participles like "feito" ("done") are not gradual (those past participles are not GAs). "Muito" (3) and "bem" modify all types of GAs. "Todo" resembles "much" since it modifies only partially closed scale GAs, but not totally closed ones. Like "much", "todo" cannot modify open scale AGs ("alto", "tall") (5) associated with a standard measure unit (feet, meters). Differently from "much", "todo" also modifies a sub-type of open scale GAs, those that do not count with a standard measure unit, like "triste" ("sad")(6). Hence, the distributions of the three BP DMs overlap (see table 2).

Looking at table 2, it seems that BP data undermines the universality of scalar structure and contextual sensitivity. The selection of GAs by BP DMs does not produce a perfect complementarily. That is not the whole picture yet. The complementarily arises when one compares the interpretation of the modified phrases (DM + GAs) in BP (see table 3). Sentences with "muito"+ GA as a predicate are context sensitivity (show relative standard pattern), while sentences with "todo"+ GA predicates consistently show context insensitivity (absolute standard pattern). So "*não completamente aberta ainda*" ("not completely open yet") is a fine continuation for "muito aberta" ('very open")(7), but contradicts "toda aberta" ("fully open")(8).

Therefore, the context-sensitivity and the variety of scalar structure of GAs may still be universal. We can maintain a universal typology for GAs, in face of BP data, provided we agree that the same operations may apply in different moments of meaning composition in natural languages: what is relevant for Degree Modifier selection in English appears in the product of Degree Modification in BP.

While the English DMs are specialized in relative GAs ("very"), open scales ("much") and completely closed scales ("well"), BPs DMs "bem" and "muito" take any GA as input. In BP, no DM specializes on closed scales, as the English "much" does. Besides selecting (lower) closed scales, "todo" may also measure out a totally open scale (6). The truth value of sentences with "todo" + GA are insensitive to context, though, showing an absolute standard interpretation. Sentences with the product of "muito" + GA as predicate are contextual dependent, showing an open scale structure. Hence, even if BP DMs do not distinguish between closed and open scales of the GAs they modify, they clearly specialize in producing phrases (MD+GA) with distinct scales and standards. So the structure and standard of scales are universally relevant. In English, they matter for the input of degree modified phrases (MD+GA). In BP, those distinctions determine the output interpretation of the degree modified phrases. Applied in different moments, the scale structure shows the same importance in both languages.

Examples:
(1) "João está bem triste" (John is so sad)
(2) "O trabalho está bem feito" (The job is well done)
(3) "João está muito triste" (John is so sad)
(4) *"O trabalho está muito feito" (*The job is very done)
(5) *"João é todo alto" (*John is so tall)
(6) "João está todo triste" (John is so sad)
(7) A porta está muito aberta, mas não completamente aberta (The door is very open, but it is not completely open yet)
(8) # A porta está toda aberta, mas não completamente aberta (#The door is fully open, but it is not completely open yet)

Tables:

Table one: English DegQs Selection

		STANDARD	
	GAs SHOW CONTEXT-SENSITIVITY?	YES	NO
SCALE	TOTALLY CLOSED		***well***
	PARTIALLY CLOSED		***much***
	TOTALLY OPEN	***very***	

Table two: Brazilian Portuguese DegQs Selection

		STANDARD	
	CONTEXT-SENSITIVITY?	YES	NO
SCALE	TOTALLY CLOSED	***muito /bem***	***muito /bem***
	PARTIALLY CLOSED	***muito /bem***	***muito /bem/ todo***
	TOTALLY OPEN	***muito /bem/ todo***[1]	

Table three: BP Degree Modifiers Phrases

		STANDARD	
	CONTEXT-SENSITIVITY?	YES	NO
SCALE	CLOSED SCALE		***todo + GA***
	OPEN SCALE	***muito + GA***	

Selected References:

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[1] "Todo" felicitously modifies the open scale AGs that are not associated with measure units.