

Degree Modifiers, Definiteness, and Specificity

Alberto Pastor
Southern Methodist University

1. Introduction

The distribution of gradable adjectives inside determiner phrases in Spanish is, at first sight, surprising:

- (1) a. He leído el libro interesante de Cela.
Have-I read the book interesting of Cela
'I have read the interesting book by Cela'
- b. [#]He leído el libro {muy/bastante/demasiado/...} interesante de Cela.
Have-I read the book {very/quite /too /...} interesting by Cela
^{##}'I have read the {very/quite/too/...} interesting book by Cela'
- (2) a. Todos mis alumnos leerán un libro interesante de Cela. [+/-spec]
All my students read-WILL a book interesting of Cela
'All my students will read an interesting book by Cela'
- b. Todos mis alumnos leerán un libro {muy/bastante/demasiado/...} interesante de Cela.
All my students read-WILL a book {very/quite /too /...} interesting of Cela
[+spec/?-esp]
'All my students have to read a {very/quite/too /...} interesting book by Cela'

On the one hand, (1b) shows that certain degree terms such as *muy* 'very', *bastante* 'quite' and *demasiado* 'too' are infelicitous in DPs headed by the definite determiner with specific reading (Leonetti, 1999).¹ On the other hand, the examples in (2) show that these very same degree terms favor the specific interpretation of the indefinite determiner. While in (2a) it is possible to obtain both a non-specific reading of the indefinite expression, in which 'each of my students has to read a different interesting book by Cela', and a specific reading in which 'there exists a certain interesting book by Cela that all my students have to read'; the latter interpretation (+specific) is the one preferred when the degree terms *muy* 'very', *bastante* 'quite', and *demasiado* 'too' are inserted in (2b). This article studies the interaction of semantic and pragmatic properties of degree with the notions of definiteness and specificity in order to explain the *a priori* paradoxical state of affairs illustrated by the aforementioned data, which can be summarized in the following question: Why do certain degree terms favor the specific interpretation of indefinites while being at the same time infelicitous with the definite article?

* I would like to thank the audience of the 13th Hispanic Linguistic Symposium (Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. October 21-24, 2009) and the two anonymous reviewers of this proceedings volume for their helpful comments and suggestions. For more details and elaborations see Pastor (forthcoming).

¹ (1b) is only infelicitous when the DP serves as a first mention definite description. However, this statement can be felicitously uttered if there has been a previous mention of a classification of individuals with respect to the degree to which they possess the property of tallness (discourse anaphora). Also, sequences [Deg+A] can appear inside definite environments when they modify a noun non-restrictively, typically in pre-nominal position. Both types of data will be discussed in section 6. On the other hand, adjectival degree constructions are compatible with the generic reading of the definite article (Demonte, 1999).

With this goal in mind, I will start section 2 by introducing the notion of definiteness that will be assumed throughout this article. In section 3, we will look at the distribution of degree inside (in)definite environments. Section 4 deals the semantic and pragmatic properties of degree modifiers. The relationship between noteworthiness and specificity is addressed in section 5; and the interactions between noteworthiness and specificity are covered in section 6. Finally, conclusions and final remarks of this article are presented in section 7.

2. Definiteness

In this paper, I assume the theory of definiteness proposed by Roberts (2003), which can be summarized in terms of features of [+/-familiarity] and [+/-uniqueness] in the Common Ground of the interlocutors:

- (3) Definite expression: [+fam_{CG}, +uniq_{CG}]
 +fam_{CG}: ‘weakly familiar in the Common Ground’
 +uniq_{CG}: ‘informatively unique in the Common Ground’

This author assumes (with Russell, 1905) that definite expressions involve both the concept of existence and the notion of uniqueness. The use of a definite nominal expression presupposes that a) there exists a discourse referent that is already part of the discourse context (like in Heim, 1982); and b) that this familiar discourse referent is unique among the discourse referents in a given context in matching the descriptive content of the nominal expression. It is important to remark that this notion of familiarity is not the same as in the most commonly assumed notion of definiteness, called “strong familiarity” by Roberts (2003), which requires the previous and explicit mention of the entity in question (discourse anaphora). Roberts defines a notion, that of “weak familiarity”, according to which the existence of the entity in question only needs to be implied by contextual information that the interlocutors share (the Common Ground). Roberts (2003) specifies that the uniqueness presupposition associated to a definite expression is a “presupposition of informational uniqueness”, that is, the requirement to provide enough information to identify and single out a discourse referent in question among the rest of discourse referents that form part of the shared knowledge of the interlocutors, regardless of whether the discourse referent had been or had not been mentioned in the previous discourse.

3. Distribution of degree in (in)definite environments

This section examines the distribution of degree terms in definite and indefinite determiner phrases with the objective of determining the scope of the interferences between (in)definiteness/(non)specificity and degree that have been introduced at the onset of this article ((1) and (2)). Nevertheless, before performing this task, I will briefly introduce the reader to the semantic and syntactic analysis of gradable adjectives and degree terms in order to ease the discussion that will go after (I follow Kennedy, 2007).

From a semantic point of view, it is widely accepted that gradable adjectives include the notions of “degree” and “scales” in their denotation. Authors such as Barstch and Vennemann (1972), Bierwisch (1989), Cresswell (1977), Kennedy (1999), develop their proposals from two main ideas: a) gradable adjectives project their arguments onto abstract representations of measurement or “degrees”; and b) a set of degrees totally ordered with respect to a dimension (height, price, etc.) constitutes a “scale”. Building upon these assumptions, and following the ideas of Barstch and Vennemann (1972, 1973), Kennedy (1999) analyzes gradable adjectives as “measure functions”. A gradable adjective such as *tall* is analyzed as a function from the subset of the domain of the individuals that have a value of height to degrees of height. Measure functions turn into properties of individuals by means of degree morphology (*more*, *-er*, *-est*, *less*, etc.). According to Kennedy, degree morphemes perform two main functions: they provide one of the arguments to the measure function denoted by the adjective and impose restrictions to the degree derived from the application of the adjective to its argument, typically by relating it to another degree. Kennedy develops his proposal from comparative degree terms (*more*, *less*, *as*) and the positive form (*John is pos-tall for his age*) in English, and

suggests that the measure function analysis can be extended to the rest of degree terms (*too, so, very*, etc.). On syntactic grounds, it is standardly assumed since the works of Abney (1987) and Corver (1991) that gradable adjectives project extended functional structure headed by degree morphology and, thus, that the extended projection of the adjective corresponds to a degree phrase, not to an adjective phrase. Degree morphemes function as degree operators that saturate the degree argument of the adjective from the head position of the upper degree phrase (Higginbotham, 1985; Zwarts, 1992; Corver, 1997).

Returning to the issue at stake, that is, the distribution of graded adjectives in (in)definite DPs, note that the interferences between degree and (in)definiteness/(non)specificity do not affect the totality of the members of the set of degree terms. First, as for the restriction on the appearance of degree in definite environments, the positive form *pos-*, and comparative and superlative degree terms are felicitous inside DPs headed by the definite article:

- (4) a. ¿Por qué no sacas a bailar a la mujer [pos-joven] de aquella mesa?
 Why no take-out to dance to the woman [pos-young] of that table?
 ‘Why don’t you dance with that woman who is young at that table?’
 b. Bebe del vaso [pos-lleno].
 drink-you of+the glass [pos-full]
 ‘Drink from the full glass’
- (5) a. La directora no quiere ofrecer el puesto a la candidata [más joven que ella].
 The chair no wants to-offer the position to the candidate [more young than she]
 ‘The chair doesn’t want to offer the position to the candidate younger than she’
 b. ¿Cómo se llama el jugador [igual de alto que Gasol]?
 How REFLEX-PRN call the player [same of tall than Gasol]?
 ‘What is the name of the player as tall as Gasol?’
- (6) a. Voy a sacar a bailar a la chica [más alta de aquella mesa].
 go-I to take-out to dance to the girl [most tall of that table]
 ‘I am going to dance with the tallest girl at that table’
 b. La directora no quiere ofrecer el puesto a la candidata [más joven de todas].
 the chair no wants to-offer the position to the candidate [more young of all]
 ‘The chair doesn’t want to offer the position to the youngest candidate’

The examples in (4) include graded adjectives in the positive form. I assume from Kennedy (1999), among many other authors, the idea that the degree in which the dimension denoted by the adjective in positive form is introduced by a morpheme *pos-* that lacks phonetic content and, syntactically, heads an upper DegP in the extended projection of the adjective. This phonetically empty degree term *pos-* licenses the degree clause introduced by *para* ‘for’ (*Juan es pos-alto para su edad* ‘John is *pos*-tall for his age’, **Juan es arquitecto para su edad* ‘*John is architect for his age’) that provides the standard value with respect to which the degree, in which the gradable property is applied to the subject of predication, is measured. Under the theory of definiteness proposed by Roberts (2003) (3), the gradable adjectives *joven* ‘young’ and *lleno* ‘full’ in (4) provide the speaker with enough information to single out the referent of the nominal expression among the rest of individuals that fall in the extension of the class characterized by the nominal description in a given context, in accordance with the presupposition of informational uniqueness associated to the definite article (3). The utterance in (4a) is felicitous in a context in which the property of being young uniquely and exclusively distinguishes one of the women considered. The meaning of the determiner phrase in (4a) is that there only exists one individual in the positive extension of the relative adjective *joven* ‘young’ with respect to a comparison class (that is, a standard value of youth pragmatically provided) in a given context. The example in (4b) includes an absolute adjective (*lleno* ‘full’) that is interpreted in relation to a scale closed in its upper end. According to Kennedy (2007), absolute adjectives do not include a comparison class (or standard value) in their denotation; absolute adjectives project the subject of predication onto the highest (or lowest) degree on the scale associated to the dimension denoted by the adjective. This way, the utterance in (4b) requires a context in which there only exists one glass that is completely full. Note that the utterances in (4) are felicitous even when the interlocutors lack “strong familiarity” with

the antecedent of the definite expressions. In other words, the use of these utterances does not depend on situations in which the referent in question has been mentioned or introduced in the previous discourse (anaphora), as predicted by the definition of definiteness proposed by Roberts (2003) (3).

Similarly, the comparative degree terms in (5) provide the amount of information needed for the speaker to find and single out the referent of the definite expressions *la candidata* ‘the candidate’ (5a) and *el jugador* ‘the player’ (5b) among the rest of discourse referents regardless of whether their antecedents had been or had not been introduced in the previous discourse. In the example in (5b) it suffices to have direct access to all players in the basketball game in question in order to confirm that there is only one player taller than the NBA Spanish player, as suggested by the presupposition of informational uniqueness associated to the definite article (Roberts, 2003). As for the utterance in (5a), it would be enough, in accordance with the presupposition of informational uniqueness of definite expressions, if the hearer accommodated her knowledge to a scenario in which there would uniquely exist a candidate younger than the chair, in the case that the hearer had not heard about the candidate before or the referent in question was not accessible in the immediate situation.

In the examples in (6) the superlative construction itself satisfies the presupposition of informational uniqueness of the definite expression. As has been noted by many authors (see, for instance, Hawkins, 1978; Heim, 1982), superlative constructions are inherently definite, because their semantics conveys the implicature that the descriptive content of the nominal expression can only be applied to one individual. By means of the superlative construction in (6a) the subject of predication is projected onto the highest degree on a scale created by ordering all members of the class “girls sitting at that table” with respect to the dimension (“height” in this case) denoted by the adjective. Thus the hearer is in a good condition to distinguish the relevant referent of the girl in (6a), although she may not have been previously mentioned, by comparing the height of all individuals in the extension of the nominal expression, and confirming that the girl in question occupies the highest place in that scale. Likewise, even in the case that the hearer is not familiarized with the job search alluded to (6b), she can easily accommodate her knowledge to a situation in which there is a job search in which the candidates are ordered according to their degree of youth, and the chair rejects the (unique) candidate occupying the highest place on the scale.

In contrast with the positive form and the comparative and superlative terms, which, as has just been presented, do not display any restriction inside definite determiner phrases, there is a series of degree terms and expressions that are excluded in these environments, as we will see next:

- (7) a. [#]La directora no quiere ofrecer el puesto a la candidata [muy/bastante/demasiado/algo/
the chair no wants to-offer the position to the candidate [very/quite /too /somewhat/
un poco/un montón de/tremendamente/... joven].
a little/a load of/tremendously/... young]
^{‘#}The chair doesn’t want to offer the position to the [very/quite/too /somewhat/ un poco/
un montón de/tremendamente/...] young candidate’
- b. [#]Saca a bailar a la chica {muy/ bastante/ demasiado/ algo/ un poco/ increíblemente/...}
Take-out to dance to the girl {very /quite/ too / somewhat/ a little/ incredibly /...}
alta.
tall
^{‘#}Dance with the {very/too/too much/somewhat/a little/incredibly/lots of/...}tall girl’

Let us now look into the interference between degree and the non-specific reading of the indefinite article:

- (8) a. Todas mis amigas viven con un hombre [pos-joven]. [+/-spec]
All my friends live with a man [pos-young].
- b. Todas mis amigas viven con un hombre [{muy/bastante/algo/...} pos-joven]. [+/-spec]
All my friends live with a man [{very/quite/somewhat/...} pos-young].
- c. Todas mis amigas viven con un hombre [{más/igual de} joven que ellas]. [+/-spec]
All my friends live with a man [{more/same of} young than they]
- d. Todas mis amigas viven con un hombre [{mucho/bastante/algo/...} más joven que ellas].
[+/-spec]
All my friends live with a man [{much/quite/somewhat/ more young than they]

In (8a) and (8c), it is possible to obtain both a specific reading of the indefinite, in which there exists a man in particular with whom all my friends live, and a non-specific interpretation in which each of my friends lives with a different man. However, the former interpretation is favored when the degree terms *muy* (*mucho*) ‘very’, *bastante* ‘quite’, *demasiado* ‘too’, *algo* ‘somewhat’, *un poco* ‘a little’, *tremendamente* ‘tremendously’, etc. are inserted in (8b) and (8d). If this is correct, that is, that the latter group of degree terms do force the specific reading of the indefinite article, then their appearance in intensional contexts is expected to be rejected (Bosque 1996, 2001):

- (9) a. ¡Baila con una mujer [pos-joven]!
Dance with a woman [pos-young]!
b. # ¡Baila con una mujer [{muy/bastante/algo/...} pos-joven]!
Dance with a woman [{very/quite /somewhat/...} pos-young]!
c. ¡Baila con una mujer [{más/igual de} joven que tú]!
Dance with a woman [{more/same of} young than you]
d. # ¡Baila con una mujer [{mucho/bastante/algo/...} más joven que tú]!
Dance with a woman [{very/quite /somewhat/...} more young than you!]
- (10) a. Juan quiere bailar con cualquier mujer [pos-joven].
John wants to-dance with any woman [pos-young]
b. # Juan quiere bailar con cualquier mujer [{muy/bastante/algo/...} pos-joven].
John wants to-dance with any woman [{very/quite/somewhat/...} pos-young]
c. Juan quiere bailar con cualquier mujer [{más/igual de} joven que él].
John wants to-dance with any woman [{more/same of} young than he]
d. # Juan quiere bailar con cualquier mujer [{mucho/bastante/algo/...} más joven que él].
John wants to-dance with any woman [{much/quite/somewhat/...} more young than he]

On the other hand, the examples in (8a,c), (9a,c), and (10a,c) show that the interference between degree and the non-specific reading of the indefinite article disappears, precisely, with the same degree terms that are also felicitous with the specific reading of the definite article: the positive form *pos-* and comparative degree terms. Except for superlative constructions, whose semantic properties make them intrinsically definite, and thus incompatible with indefinites (see, among others, Hawkins, 1978; Heim, 1982).

Summarizing, the data presented in this section show that the infelicity of degree in definite environments and the interference of with the specific reading of indefinite DPs do not affect the totality of lexical units that belong to the class of degree terms, but just a subset of this class. Consequently, two different subclasses of degree terms should be distinguished. The positive form, comparative terms, and superlative terms constitute the Class I, and do not display the aforementioned restrictions. The Class II is composed of a numerous series of degree terms including *muy* ‘very’, *bastante* ‘quite’, *demasiado* ‘too’, *algo* ‘somewhat’, *un poco* ‘a little’, *increíblemente* ‘incredibly’, *mogollón de* ‘lots of’, etc., which are infelicitous in definite DPs and favor the specific reading of indefinites.

- (11) Class I: *pos-*, comparatives, superlatives.
Class II: *muy* (*mucho*), *bastante*, *demasiado*, *algo*, *un poco*, *increíblemente*, *mogollón de*, etc.

4. Degree modifiers: semantic and pragmatic properties

Semantically, the members of Class I fit very well in the definition of degree morphemes formulated by Kennedy (1999). Recall that, according to this author, the semantic function of degree morphemes is to provide one of the arguments to the measure function denoted by the adjective and to impose restrictions to the degree derived from applying the adjective to its external argument, typically by relating it to another degree. Thus, the positive form *pos-* and comparative and superlative terms involve a comparative relation between the degree that they introduce (d1) and another degree to which they relate (d2). The latter degree serves as a point of comparison in the case of the comparatives *más* ‘more’, *menos* ‘less’, *tan* ‘as’ and *igual de* ‘same as’; or it refers to a standard value on a scale ordered pragmatically when the positive form *pos-* is used. Finally, the degree introduced by

superlatives *más* ‘most’ and *menos* ‘least’ equals the highest or lowest degree, respectively, on a scale. At this juncture, and as an intermediate step towards the presentation of what I believe is the semantic function of Class II degree terms, I would like to call attention to the fact that Class I degree terms are subdivided into those that establish an equality comparative relationship with another degree (“the same as”), and those that introduce a degree that is located higher or lower on the scale with respect to the other degree with which they establish a comparative relationship. The former group includes the comparative *tan* ‘as’, the degree expression *igual de* ‘same as’, and the superlatives *más* ‘most’ and *menos* ‘least’.² The degree introduced by these terms occupies the same place on the scale as the other degree to which they relate. However, the members of the latter group, that is, comparatives *más* ‘more’ and *menos* ‘less’, and the positive form *pos-*, open an interval on the scale between the degree they introduce and the other degree to which they compare.³ Having said that, I propose that the semantic function of Class II degree terms (henceforth degree modifiers) is to modify the interval opened by Class I degree terms (or “degree operators”) with respect to the other degree to which they relate, such that an evaluation on the distance of that interval is added:

- (12) a. Juan es [bastante [más alto que Pedro]].
 John is [quite [more tall than Peter]]
 ‘John is quite taller than Peter’
 b. Juan es [bastante [pos-alto para su edad]].
 John is [quite [pos-tall for his age]]
 ‘John is too tall for his age’

In (12a) by adding the degree modifier *bastante* ‘quite’ the speaker not only communicates that John’s degree of height is higher on the scale than Peter’s degree of height, but also considers the distance between these two degrees to be considerably high in a given context. In the same way, the utterance in (12b) is interpreted as ‘John is considerably taller than the degree of height taken as the standard for his age’. Evidence for the proposal that the interpretation of degree modifiers is related to the opening of an interval on a scale comes from the ungrammaticality of their combination with degree operators that convey an equality comparative relationship between the degree they introduce and the degree they relate to, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (13) a. * Juan es [bastante [igual de alto que yo]].
 John is [quite [same of tall than I]]
 b. * Juan es [bastante [tan alto como yo]].
 John is [quite [as tall as I]]
 c. * Juan es el chico [bastante [más alto de la clase]].
 John is the boy [quite [more tall of the class]]

The illformedness of the sentences in (13) is explained because there is no interval between two degrees whose distance could be predicated to be considerably high (*bastante*). In (13a,b) the degree introduced by the comparatives *tan* ‘as’ and *igual de* ‘same as’ occupies the same place on the scale as the speaker’s degree of height. In the case of (13c) the degree of height of the referent of the proper noun *Juan* is projected onto the highest degree on a scale (of height), and, therefore, both degrees share the same position on that scale.

Based on the previous discussion, I argue that Class II degree terms are, in fact, degree modifiers that semantically function as predicates that take as their argument the interval opened by the degree operators that involve an inequality comparison with respect to another degree, as informally put in (14):

- (14) a. *bastante* ($d_1 > d_2$)
 b. the distance of the interval from d_2 to d_1 is considerable

² Also the positive degree of adjectives in absolute form –an individual is projected onto the highest or lowest degree on a scale.

³ The positive form can also establish an equality comparative relation with a standard value (Cresswell 1977).

According to (14), a degree modifier such as *bastante* ‘quite’ functions semantically as a predicate that takes an interval (i.e., a set of degrees) between two degrees as its argument, such that an evaluation on the distance of this interval is added –the interval is considerably big. Additional nuances can be added through the use of *muy* ‘very’,⁴ such as the denotation of a degree that is significantly high, or by means of *suficientemente* ‘sufficiently’, which introduces a degree that satisfies the expectations; also, by including syntactic elatives such as *increíblemente* ‘incredibly’ or *tremendamente* ‘tremendously’, which are associated with the denotation of extreme degree.⁵ Similarly, by using the modifiers *un poco* ‘a little’ or *algo* ‘somewhat’ a degree is predicated to occupy a significantly low position on a scale;⁶ or one can express that a certain degree is insufficient in a given context through the lexical units *escasamente* ‘scarcely’.

Once we have known the semantic function of degree modifiers, let us see next whether there is any pragmatic condition in their denotation affecting their use. Note first that, pragmatically, the use of degree modifiers is conditioned to situations in which the speaker considers that the distance of the interval opened by the degree operator (*pos-*, *más* ‘more’, and *menos* ‘less’) with respect to another degree is “noteworthy” (i.e., worth mention); thus the informative focus is placed on how the speaker evaluates the degree to which the property denoted by the adjective is applied to its external argument. Consider, for instance, the following conversation:

- (15) a. --Mother: Hijo, sólo pesas 70 kilos; eso es estar bastante flaco.
 Son, only weigh-YOU 70 kilos; that is to-be quite skinny
 ‘My son, you only weigh 70 kilos; that is considerably skinny’
 b. --Son: No, mamá, no seas exagerada.
 No, mom, no be-YOU exaggerated.
 ‘No, mom, don’t exaggerate’

The utterance (15a) requires a context in which the speaker believes (judges) that the degree to which her son is skinny is worth noting, precisely for being (according to her) a considerably high degree on the scale with respect to a standard value. Moreover, by using the degree modifier *bastante* ‘quite’ in (15a) the speaker addresses the attention of the hearer to her evaluation of the distance between the degree to which a property is possessed (d1) and another degree serving as a point of reference (d2; a standard). This is the reason why a follow-up assertion on the part of the son such as *#no, no estoy flaco* (‘no, I am not skinny’) would be anomalous, since what it is at issue in this conversation is not whether or not the son is skinny, but rather how each speaker judges the degree to which the son is skinny according to his/her own criteria. Similarly, in an utterance such as *Me ascendieron por ser [bastante trabajador]* (‘I was promoted for being considerably hardworking’) the informative focus falls onto a degree that is considerably high more than onto the dimension denoted by the adjective. In this way, one understands that the cause of the promotion is not exactly “being hardworking”, but rather having that property to a considerably high degree. In terms of the discourse information structure, in this example the denotation of ‘a considerably high degree’ corresponds to the new information (focus), while the denotation of ‘being hardworking’ is taken as the background information.

That said, I assume that degree modifiers have a “noteworthiness” feature associated with them. I borrow the notion of “noteworthiness” from Ionin (2006). According to Ionin, a property/individual is noteworthy when the speaker considers that it is worth mention. In the case of degree modifiers, the noteworthiness feature is triggered pragmatically when these terms are in use. The use of degree modifiers is restricted to situations in which the speaker believes that the interval opened by a degree operator (specifically, the positive form *pos-* and inequality comparatives) is worth note. This way, degree modifiers turn a graded property into a property that is also a noteworthy one, thus becoming relevant conversationally. In other words, since degree modifiers introduce an evaluation about the size of an interval on a scale, it is necessary to assume that there is a certain quantity of information

⁴ See note 8 on the difference between *muy* and *very* in English.

⁵ In the case of the lexical elatives (*estupendo* ‘stupendous’, *magnífico* ‘magnificent’, etc.) and morphological elatives (*alt-ísimo* ‘tall-SUPERLATIVE’) the extreme degree denotation is codified in the adjective lexical entry (Pastor, 2008).

⁶ On the difference between *poco* ‘little’ and *un poco* ‘a little’ see Pastor (2008) and the references cited therein.

about the referent that it is accessible and that is mentioned because it is relevant to construct the dialogue.

5. Noteworthiness and specificity

Ionin (2006), basing on the semantic and pragmatic properties of the indefinite *this*[+referential] in English (for instance, *This guy enters into a bar and...*), develops the notion of “specificity as noteworthiness”, which I assume in this work. Specifically, she proposes that there exists a direct relation between noteworthiness and the referential interpretation of indefinites. Ionin (2006) assumes a concept of specificity as “the intent to refer” (Fodor and Sag 1982), and argues that to predicate an individual a noteworthy property implies that the speaker has a particular referent in mind. This makes referentiality responsible for the specific interpretation of the DP it heads. Ionin’s main claims are summarized as follows: (i) *this*[+referential] includes a felicity condition such that the individual denoted by the nominal it introduces must have a noteworthy property; (ii) noteworthiness makes the DP referential, so it appears to have wide scope over other operators.

With these ideas in mind, I argue that the specific reading of indefinite DPs containing a degree modifier is related to the “noteworthiness” of the DP’s referent. Before developing this idea, let us first assume that the noteworthiness associated with the argument of degree modifiers percolates through the whole adjectival degree construction. Thus, in a DP such as *un hombre {muy/bastante /...} joven* (‘a significantly/considerably young man’) in (8b) the DP’s referential argument becomes worth note by virtue of being assigned a noteworthy property –in this case, the property of being young to a degree considerably high (according to the speaker). Having said that, and assuming a notion of specificity as the “intent to refer” (Fodor and Sag 1982), I propose that to ascribe an individual a property to a degree that is considered noteworthy by the speaker (and, therefore, worth mention) entails that the speaker has a particular referent in mind. In this sense, the insertion of a degree modifier in an indefinite DP such as *un hombre {muy/bastante /...} joven* (‘a significantly/considerably young man’) in (8b) favors an interpretation of the DP as a referential expression (by virtue of being predicated a noteworthy property), which explains the fact that it gives the appearance of scoping out of an operator. Furthermore, this is also the reason for the interference between degree modifiers a non-specific determiner such as *cualquier* ‘any’ in (9b,d) and (10b,d).⁷

6. Gradability and definiteness

Recall that the goal of this paper is to explain why a certain group of degree terms, which I have identified as “degree modifiers”, are infelicitous in definite DPs, while favoring the specific reading of the indefinite article. In the previous section, we have seen that the noteworthiness feature associated with degree modifiers is directly related to the specific interpretation of the nominal expression where the adjective is inserted. In this section, basing again on the work of Ionin (2006), I will propose that noteworthiness is also on the base of the infelicity of degree modifiers in definite environments.

As we already know, Ionin (2006) analyzes the article *this* [+referential] in English as a specificity marker that also has felicity conditions based on the noteworthiness of its referent. According to Ionin,

⁷ Bosque (1996, 2001) offers a syntactic based explanation for the specific reading of indefinites that include elatives and prenominal adjectives. According to this author, both types of adjectives base-generate as predicates in a small clause, and then move up to the [Spec-DegP] to check a degree feature (See (i) below). This movement is optional in the case of elatives. Then, these terms covertly raise in FL to a functional phrase above DP. The latter movement is associated to an epistemic modal feature that Bosque assigns to modal and excess quantifiers.

(i) OPERATOR ... [_{FP} (famoso)_i] [_D un [_{DegP} famoso_i [_{Deg°} Ø] [_{AP} actor [_{AP} (famoso)_i]]]]

In the analysis in (i) the final position of the adjective in [Spec, FP] prevents an upper operator from binding the indefinite, thus blocking the variable interpretation of the indefinite. On the other hand, the specific reading of the indefinite is obtained when the whole DP moves up above the operator, which thus falls under the scope of the indefinite. In my opinion, an analysis like (i) is problematic. The final position of the graded adjective in [Spec, FP], which is crucial to account for the specific reading in (i) along the lines of Bosque’s explanation, is justified only for excess denoting degree terms. However, there are other degree terms that do not denote excess degree (*un poco* ‘a little’, *algo* ‘somewhat’, *muy* ‘very’, *bastante* ‘too’, etc.), but that also favor the specific reading of indefinites.

there is nothing in the denotation of this lexical unit that indicates indefiniteness; therefore, it should be able to appear in definite environments. However, the article *this* [+referential] is incompatible with DPs that are obligatorily definite, even when its noteworthy conditions have been satisfied: #I talked to *this* mother of my friend Sam. (She is really nice!). The reason for the anomaly of this example lies on the distinction between “presuppositions” and “felicity conditions”. Related to this distinction is the observation of the fact that the definite article is used when both the speaker and the hearer are able to presuppose the existence of a unique individual that matches the descriptive content of the nominal expression in a given context; however, the use of the article *this* [+referential] takes place when the speaker wishes to communicate that the DP referent has a noteworthy property. Basing on this contrast, Ionin (2006) proposes that “felicity conditions”, which are only known by the speaker, should not have the same status as “presuppositions”, which are shared by both interlocutors.

Adopting the distinction between felicity conditions and presuppositions drawn by Ionin (2006), I will next explain the infelicity of degree modifiers in definite contexts presented in (1b) and (7). Recall that, according to Roberts (2003), the uniqueness presupposition associated to the definite article is a presupposition of informational uniqueness, that is, the requirement to provide enough information to locate and uniquely distinguish the antecedent of the discourse referent in question among the rest of discourse referents that form part of the participants’ shared knowledge (the Common Ground), regardless whether or not the discourse referent in question has been mentioned in the previous discourse (see (3)). Thus, the use of the definite article in (7) requires a context in which the hearer is able to locate in the participants’ Common Ground a referent that is distinguished from the rest of discourse referents by uniquely matching the descriptive content of the nominal expression, in this case, being, for instance, “*una candidata bastante joven*” ‘a quite young candidate’ in (7a) or “*una chica bastante alta*” ‘a girl that is quite tall’ in (7b). The problem with these anomalous examples is that the restriction of the extension of the nominal expression is carried out by means of a property that is modified by a degree term that, in turn, includes felicity conditions based on the noteworthiness of the degree with which they are associated. Assuming with Ionin (2006) that felicity conditions only involve the speaker, the infelicity of these examples is due to the fact that the speaker does not provide the hearer with enough information to locate the unique referent in question in the participants Common Ground, as established by the definite article existence and informational uniqueness presuppositions (Roberts, 2003). In other words, an utterance such as (7b) is infelicitous due to the hearer’s difficulty finding a context in which exists only a unique girl that is distinguished from the rest of discourse referents in the Common Ground for being “*bastante guapa*” ‘quite tall’, since the criterion to determine what makes this property noteworthy (that is, what counts as a degree considerably high with respect to a standard value) is only known by the speaker. Likewise, the hearer in (7a) is unaware of how the speaker decides what to be *bastante joven* ‘quite young’ is, which makes the process of locating the referent (whose existence is presupposed) a highly costly one. In terms of the Relevance Theory (Wilson and Sperber, 2004), the use of degree modifiers in the examples in (7) is infelicitous due to the hearer’s difficulty finding a relevant context in which the existence and informational uniqueness presuppositions of the definite article are satisfied. The reason for this is that the noteworthiness felicity conditions of degree modifiers, which are only known by the speaker, interfere with definite article presuppositions of existence and informational uniqueness, which must be shared by the speaker and the hearer.⁸

I will now deal with a set of data that, *a priori*, could be problematic for the explanation that I have just proposed for the infelicity of degree modifiers in determiner phrases headed by the definite article. The following data are felicitous instances of utterances that include degree modifiers inside definite environments, contrary to the data we have been studying so far:

⁸ The term *very* in English can be felicitously uttered in definite environments, as opposed to Spanish *muy*: *Dance with the very tall girl*. Kennedy and McNally (2005) analyze *very* as an intensifier whose semantic function is to manipulate the standard function introduced by the positive form. According to these authors, [*very tall*] is (syntactically and semantically) just like [*tall*], and in fact nothing prevents the sequence [*very+A*] from being further modified by other elements (*He specializes in swimwear and is quite very popular for it*). The difference is that the standard of comparison for the former is computed by considering only those objects that count as tall in the context of utterance. Then, general principles of informativity ensure that the modified standard function will select a new standard of comparison partitions the domain of [*very tall*] into things it is true of and things it is false of. In other words, in *the very tall girl* the standard value is more likely part of the common ground.

- (16) a. Invita al muy inteligente hijo de María.
 invite to-the very intelligent son of Mary
- b. # Invita al hijo muy inteligente de María.
 Invite to-the son very intelligent of Mary
- (17) A-- Hay espacio en una clase de matemáticas fácil, en otra clase bastante fácil y en otra más demasiado fácil.
 other more too easy
 ‘There is space in an easy math class, in another one that is quite easy, and in one more that is too easy’
- B-- Pues, creo que solo me sirve el horario de la clase bastante fácil.
 Well, think-I that only me serves the schedule of the class quite easy
 ‘Well, I think that the only one that fits in my schedule is the class quite easy’

The first type of data (16) is related to the different position of adjectives around the noun. The second type of data has to do with the previous mention of a classification of individuals/objects with respect to the degree in which they possess a property (17) (Leonetti, 1999). Next I will argue that these data are not real counterexamples for my proposal, since they can be explained without giving up my analysis of the semantic and pragmatic properties of degree modifiers, and their interference with (in)definite environments.

I will begin with the type of data illustrated in (16a). The difference between the felicitous utterance in (16a) and the infelicitous example in (16b) lies on the prenominal and postnominal adjective position. It is widely known that in Spanish, as well as in other Romance languages, adjectives receive different interpretations depending on their position around the noun. The numerous bibliography existing on the matter includes notions such as “referent modifiers”/“reference modifiers”, “restrictive modifiers”/“unrestrictive modifiers”, “attributive modifiers”/“predicative modifiers” or “intensional predicates”/“extensional predicates”. Bouchard (2002) reduces these notions to two basic functions of adjectives in Romance languages depending on whether they generate before or after the noun they modify. Postnominal adjectives modify the noun as a whole. The meaning obtained from the combination of a noun and a postnominal adjective is equivalent to the intersection between the natural class preestablished by the noun and the natural class integrated by the individuals characterized by the adjective. Bouchard argues that postnominal adjectives have a subclassifying function. On the other hand, according to this author, prenominal adjectives modify one of the subcomponents of the sense of the noun, thus creating a new class. Consequently, the extension of the noun changes. Adopting these ideas from Bouchard (2002), I will explain the contrast between (16a) and (16b) as follows: For instance, if someone is asked to invite *al hijo inteligente de María* ‘the intelligent son of Mary’ (with the adjective in prenominal position), the following implicature arises: Mary has two or more sons, one of them intelligent and the others not. It is required, therefore, that the hearer be able to perform a subdivision of the set composed of sons of Mary with respect to the property “being intelligent”, such that the hearer can single out the unique individual in the extension of the noun that matches the descriptive content “being a son of Mary” and “being intelligent to a certain degree” (above a standard value provided pragmatically). What happens when a degree modifier such as *muy* ‘very’ is inserted? By using the degree modifier *muy* ‘very’ the property of “being intelligent to a certain degree that is significantly high on the scale in a given context” becomes a noteworthy one that receives the informative focus of the utterance where it appears. Given that noteworthiness is a pragmatic property that involves only the speaker, the hearer, then, is not in a good position to locate and single out the unique referent matching the descriptive content of the nominal expression, because the hearer is unaware of the criterion used to sub-classify the class in question. For that reason, it turns out to be very costly to find a context in (16b) in which only exists a very intelligent son of Mary in a given situation, giving rise to the infelicity of this utterance. On the other hand, in the utterance *invita al (muy) inteligente hijo de María* in (16a), the adjective in prenominal position modifies the characteristic function of the sense of the noun (Bouchard, 2002). In this case the property of “being intelligent to a degree considered noteworthy on the part of the speaker” does not interfere with the process of finding and singling out the referent, whose existence and informational uniqueness are presupposed by the use of the definite article. This is so because in (16a) the hearer is

not required to locate a unique referent that is distinguished from the rest of the members in its class for “being very intelligent”, since this property is now part of the definition of a new class, and, therefore, characterizes its extension (in this case a singleton) as a whole. The hearer simply needs to locate the unique son of Mary, who is also characterized for being very intelligent by virtue of being a member of the class “son of Mary”. It can be concluded, then, that the incompatibility between the felicity conditions of degree modifiers and the definite article presuppositions of existence and informational uniqueness, although being semantic-pragmatic nature, is subdetermined by the syntactic configuration of the nominal phrase (attribution versus predication).

I will now focus on the type of data illustrated in (17). Observe that the felicity of the degree modifier *bastante* ‘quite’ in this example is directly related to the fact that there is a previous classification of math classes (with respect to the degree in which they possess the property of being easy). In this example, the interlocutors can find, via anaphora, the referent of the definite expression *la clase bastante difícil* in the previous statement. This is, therefore, a different use of the definite article from the one that we have been dealing with in this article so far. In this example, the presupposition of existence of the definite article is satisfied by the introduction of its referent in the previous discourse, thus becoming familiar to both interlocutors (Heim, 1982). Following Roberts’ (2003) terminology, this example illustrates a case of “strong familiarity” (discourse anaphora) between the interlocutors and the antecedent of the definite expression. The felicity of this utterance (17) is explained because the semantic and pragmatic properties of the degree modifier do not interfere in this case with the semantic and pragmatic properties of the definite article in the process of reference resolution; because, in fact, the reference of this DP has already been resolved in the indefinite DP that serves as its antecedent. It seems, therefore, that behind the (in)felicity of degree modifiers in definite environments, two different uses of the definite article are involved: one that is related to “strong familiarity” (discourse anaphora) of the interlocutors with the referent of the definite expression (in the sense of Heim, 1982); and another one associated to “weak familiarity” (following the characterization of definiteness by Roberts, 2003). In the latter case the definite article includes in its denotation a presupposition of informational uniqueness, which requires that the speaker provide the hearer with enough information to single out the unique referent in the Common Ground that is distinguished from the remaining discourse referents for matching the descriptive content of the nominal expression, regardless of whether or not the referent in question has been mentioned in the previous discourse. This is the characteristic use of the definite article in cases of a referent’s first mention, and it is, precisely, in these cases where the infelicity of degree modifiers that we have studied in this paper arises. Recall that, assuming a distinction between presupposition and felicity conditions as drawn by Ionin (2006), the noteworthiness feature associated to a graded property modified by degree modifiers (in predicative position) interferes with the process of reference resolution of the definite expression, since the criterion to restrict the extension of the noun (that is, a noteworthy graded property) is only known by the speaker; thus giving rise to incompatibility with the definite article presuppositions of existence and informational uniqueness, which involve both interlocutors.⁹

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have dealt with a phenomenon, that of the interferences between degree and (in)definiteness and (non)specificity, that has been little studied. I have explained such interferences as

⁹ Sequences [Degree modifier + adjective] and elatives are in general more acceptable with demonstratives (*esa película { muy aburrida/aburridísima}*, ‘this very boring movie’) than they are with the definite article. According to Leonetti (2000), among others, demonstratives are definite determiners and, as such, they encode definiteness, but they crucially differ from articles and pronouns in introducing a more restrictive procedure in the search for the intended referent. A demonstrative requires the hearer to search for the intended referent relying on some link to the deictic centre, and this is enough to distinguish demonstratives from definite articles, given that articles do not encode any deictic feature. This implies that the constraints imposed by demonstratives on referent identification are stronger, or more specific, than those imposed by the definite article: in fact, the referent must not only be uniquely identifiable, but also contextually familiar or activated. Therefore, following Leonetti (2000), degree modifiers are compatible with demonstratives because the descriptive content is no longer essential to guarantee uniqueness in this case.

a result of the interaction of lexical properties of determiners and (certain) degree terms, and conditions of pragmatic nature. This article makes two main contributions to our knowledge of degree in the adjectival domain: a new distinction between degree operators and degree modifiers (both conceptually and with respect to the data), and a uniform explanation of two phenomena that, to the best of my knowledge, had not been put into relation to one another in the bibliography: the infelicity of the combination of certain degree terms with the definite article, and the fact that certain degree terms favor the specific reading of the indefinite article.

References

- Abney, Stephen. 1987. The English noun phrase in its sentential aspect. Doctoral Dissertation, MIT, Cambridge, MA.
- Bartsch, Renate & Theo Vennemann. 1972. The grammar of relative adjectives and comparison. *Linguistische Berichte* 20, 19–32.
- Bierwisch, Manfred. 1989. The semantics of gradation. In: Bierwisch, B., Lang, E., (Eds.), *Dimensional adjectives: Grammatical structure and conceptual interpretation*. Springer-Verlag, Berlin, pp. 71–261.
- Bosque, Ignacio. 1996. On specificity and adjective position. In Gutiérrez-Rexach, J., Silva-Villar, L. (Eds.), *Perspectives on Spanish linguistics*, UCLA, pp. 1–13.
- Bosque, Ignacio. 2001. Adjective position and the interpretation of indefinites. In: Gutiérrez-Rexach, J., Silva-Villar, L. (Eds.), *Current issues in Spanish syntax and semantics*. Mouton de Gruyter, Nueva York, pp. 17–37.
- Bouchard, Denis. 2002. *Adjectives, Number and Interfaces. Why Languages Vary*. Elsevier, Amsterdam.
- Corver, Norbert. 1991. Evidence for DegP. *NELS* 22, 33–47.
- Corver, Norbert. 1997. Much-support as a last resort. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 28:1, 119–164.
- Cresswell, Max. 1977. The semantics of degree. In: Partee, B. H. (Ed.), *Montague grammar*. Academic Press, New York, pp. 261–292.
- Demonte, Violeta. 1999. A minimal account of Spanish adjective position and interpretation. In: Franco, J., Landa, A., Martín, J. (Eds.), *Grammatical analyses in Basque and Romance Linguistics*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 45–75.
- Fodor, Janet & Ivan Sag. 1982. Referential and Quantificational Indefinites. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 5, 355–398.
- Hawkins, John. A. 1978. *Definiteness and Indefiniteness*. Croom Helm, London.
- Heim, Irene. 1982. *The Semantics of Definite and Indefinite Noun Phrases*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
- Higginbotham, James. 1985. On semantics. *Linguistic Inquiry* 16, 547–593.
- Ionin, Tania. 2006. This is definitely specific: specificity and definiteness in article systems. *Natural Language Semantics* 14, 175–234.
- Kennedy, Christopher. 1999. *Projecting the adjective: The syntax and semantics of gradability and comparison*, Garland, New York (1997 UCSC Ph.D thesis).
- Kennedy, Christopher. 2007. Vagueness and grammar: the semantics of relative and absolute gradable adjectives, *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30, 1–45.
- Kennedy, Christopher & Louise McNally. 2005. The syntax and semantics of multiple degree modification in English. *Proceedings of the HPSG05 Conference*. University of Lisbon. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Leonetti, Manuel. 1999. El artículo. In: Bosque, I., Demonte, V. (Eds.), *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española*. Espasa, Madrid, pp. 787–890.
- Leonetti, Manuel. 2000. The asymmetries between the definite article and demonstratives: a procedural account. Paper presented to the 7th International Pragmatics Conference in Budapest, July 2000.
- Pastor, Alberto. 2008. Split Analysis of Gradable Adjectives in Spanish. *Probus* 20.2, 257–299.
- Pastor, Alberto. (Forthcoming). Sobre las interferencias entre el grado, la (in)definitud y la (in)especificidad. *Revista Española de Lingüística (RSEL)*.
- Roberts, Craig. 2003. Uniqueness in Definite Noun Phrases. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25, 287–350.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1905. On Denoting. *Mind* 66, 479–493.
- Wilson, Dan & Deirdre Sperber. 2004. Relevance Theory. In: Horn, L.R, Ward, G. (Eds.), *The handbook of pragmatics*. Blackwell, Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 607–632.
- Zwarts, Joost. (1992). X'-syntax/X'-semantics: On the interpretation of functional and lexical heads. Led, OTS, Utrecht.

Selected Proceedings of the 13th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium

edited by Luis A. Ortiz-López

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2011

Copyright information

Selected Proceedings of the 13th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium
© 2011 Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-57473-442-3 library binding

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Ordering information

Orders for the library binding edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.
To place an order, go to www.lingref.com or contact:

Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, sales@cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information

This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at www.lingref.com. Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.

This paper can be cited as:

Pastor, Alberto. 2011. Degree Modifiers, Definiteness, and Specificity. In *Selected Proceedings of the 13th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*, ed. Luis A. Ortiz-López, 325-336. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #2499.