

# Notes on moderate excess

Rick Nouwen

Jaspers et al. (2016) observe a striking contrast for Dutch diminishers.

- (1) #Luk is een beetje aardig.  
Luk is a bit friendly.  
Not: ‘Luk is friendly to a low degree’
- (2) Luk is een beetje onaardig.  
Luk is a bit unfriendly.  
‘Luk is unfriendly to (at least) a low degree’

In general, diminishers turn out to be compatible with negative evaluative adjectives, but less so with positive ones. Dimensional adjectives show no such contrast:

- (3) #Luk is een beetje lang / klein.  
Luk is a bit tall / short.  
Not: ‘Luk is tall / short to a low degree’

The sentences in both (1) and (3) are slightly odd, but not entirely uninterpretable. They both have a reading as an excessive: on that reading, (1) says that Luk is somehow *too nice* and in (3) he is said to be *too tall/short* for some currently salient purpose. Intuitively, the data in (3) make perfect sense. To say of someone that they’re *tall* is to say that their height somehow stands out, as argued in (for instance) Fara (2000) and Kennedy (2007). The reasoning could now be that (3) is odd because there is no such thing as standing out *slightly*. Turning the adjective’s interpretation from the positive into an excessive does away with the standing out ingredient. Being *too tall* is a crisp judgement: there can be a precise height involved. Once you are taller than that height, you are too tall. There is no need to stand out and it is very clear what it means to be only “a bit too tall”.

Can we apply the same reasoning to (1), though? It is definitely tempting to do this, but Jaspers et al.’s observation blocks this route: any explanation of why (1) requires coercion to the excessive needs also explain why (2) does not need such coercion. Jaspers et al. therefore stipulate that in cases like (1) and (2) diminishers favour the negative part of scales. This stipulation has some empirical bite because they observe that this tendency can be reversed in non-veridical environments. For instance, the intuitions for questions in (4) and (5) are in perfect contrast to (1) and (2).

- (4) Is Luk een beetje aardig?  
 Is Luk a bit friendly.  
 Roughly: ‘Is it true that Luk is friendly to at least a low degree?’
- (5) #Is Luk een beetje onaardig?  
 Is Luk a bit unfriendly.

Although data like (1)/(2) have never really been discussed in much detail in the literature, there are some mentions of similar observations for English. For instance, Paradis (1997), in a study of the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English Greenbaum and Svartvik (1990), observes that “the adjectives that combine with *a bit* are [...] characterized by a negative content” (p.90) and that “[*a*] *bit* in combination with neutral adjectives often call forth a reading of excess” (ibid.). Also in a corpus study of English, Bylinina and Zadorozhny (2012) conclude that “negative [evaluative adjectives] co-occur with low degree modifiers significantly more often than positive [evaluative adjectives]”.

A quick request for judgements around some international colleagues reveals that the contrast between (1) and (2) appears in other languages as well. However, in all the languages I checked, contrasts like (1)/(4) or (2)/(5) were not attested. That is, the felicitous (and non-excessive) combination of diminishers and positive evaluative adjectives in questions appears pretty much to be a phenomenon limited to Dutch. (To be clear: the data for Dutch are unquestionable. The contrasts are very crisp indeed.)

It is then perhaps wise not to try to derive the Dutch behaviour as a general prediction for the semantics of diminishers, since it is going to misfire in other languages. For that reason, I would like to see if we could somehow account for (1)/(2) directly. My proposal is going to be that there is a single core sensitivity of diminishers and that the observations regarding (1)/(2) should be seen in that light. What could that sensitivity be? We know that diminishers are sensitive to minimum standards. In fact, since Rotstein and Winter (2004), it is common practice to identify adjectives as involving a minimum standard by testing whether they are compatible with diminishers.

- (6) Luk’s towel was a bit wet / #dry.

We also know that diminishers are fine with excessives, witness (1)/(3) and explicit excessives like (7).

- (7) Luk was a bit too tall.

Also, diminishers are fine with comparatives, witness (8).

- (8) Luk was a bit taller than me.

Here is what I think all these observations have in common: Comparatives, excessives and minimum standard adjectives can all been seen as *existential structures*. To start with (8), this is often analysed as *there is a degree d, Luk is d-tall and the*

*speaker is not d-tall* (e.g. Seuren 1973; van Rooij 2008; Alrenga and Kennedy 2014). Being *d-tall* here means that the height in question is greater or equal than the height *d* stands for. In other words, being *d-tall* means being *at least* that tall. (See, for instance, Heim 2000; Nouwen 2010 for the rationale behind this.) Excessives have a similar structure: (7) is often analysed as a comparative, as *there is a degree d, Luk is d-tall and Luk being d tall is not compatible with the speaker's goals/desires/norms (etc)*. (Heim, 2000; von Stechow et al., 2004). Finally, absolute adjectives with a minimum standard can also be analysed existentially. This idea goes back to Kamp and Rossdeutscher (1994), who, in fact reserve the label *existential* for minimum standard adjectives: *wet* is existential since it requires *some* amount of wetness.

In contrast, note that the sufficiency construction and maximum standard adjectives can be seen as triggering universally quantified interpretations.

- (9) Luk is tall enough.  
*for every degree d such that Luk being d-tall is required in order to satisfy the speaker's goals/desires/goals: Luk is d-tall*
- (10) Luk's towel is dry.  
*for every degree d of wetness: Luk's towel is not d-wet*

Being *dry* is being *maximally dry*,<sup>1</sup> whereas being *wet* is being at least *minimally wet*. Sufficiency means that *all* that needs to be there is there. Excess means that *something* is there that shouldn't be there. In sum, we get the following:

- (11) **Universals:** sufficiency constructions, absolute maximum standard adjectives, equatives<sup>2</sup>
- (12) **Existentials:** excessive constructions, absolute minimum standard adjectives, comparatives

We are now ready to characterise the distribution of diminishers:

- (13) *Diminishers are compatible with existential degree constructions only.*

This now accounts for why diminishers combine with *too*, comparatives and minimum standard adjectives. It also accounts why it does not combine with other constructions and it furthermore explains why, as Jaspers et al. noticed for (3), combinations of relative adjectives and diminishers end up coercing the interpretation of the adjective into an excessive. So far, however, (13) does not account for any data involving evaluative adjectives, in particular the observation in (1)/(2).

Bierwisch (1967, 1989) proposes that all evaluative adjectives are minimum standard adjectives. *To be nice* means to have a non-zero degree of niceness. *To be nasty* means to have a non-zero degree of nastiness. There are good reasons for doing this, especially since it makes good predictions regarding the absence

<sup>1</sup>Correspondingly, Kamp and Rossdeutscher (1994) call such adjectives *universal*.

<sup>2</sup>*Luk is as tall as Mary* means that all degrees *d* to which Mary is tall are degrees to which Luk is tall. See, for instance, Klein (1980) for an approach along these line (without degrees though).

of proper antonymy with evaluative adjectives. However, for our focus it will not do. Given the above assumptions, Bierwisch predicts all evaluative adjectives to be compatible with diminishers. (This point is made explicitly by Bylinina and Zadorozhny 2012).

I will propose a minimal adjustment, though, that may help ease this tension. I would like to propose that, somehow, negative evaluative adjectives are like excessive constructions and positive ones are like sufficiency constructions. I am taking guidance here from the intuition that at some indeterminate level of analysis, excess is bad and sufficiency is good. Here is one way of seeing this. In the analyses we described above, excess involves a degree that is *incompatible* with the speaker's goals, while sufficiency involves degrees that *are* compatible with these. Another similar illustration of this intuition comes from the analysis of Schwarzschild (2008):

- (14) John is too old to join the team.  
~ because John is *d*-old, John can't join the team
- (15) John is old enough to join the team.  
~ because John is *d*-old, John can join the team

Excessives are negative because they do not reach goals. Sufficiency constructions are positive since they (in principle) do allow you to reach the goal. (I say "in principle" since you can have both enough and too much. Someone who is 80 years old is *old enough* to go to primary school, but she is also *too old* to go: excess overrules sufficiency.)

Turning this around, I would like to propose that negative evaluatives are excessives. Someone is *nasty* if and only if there exists a degree of nastiness that brings about the negative evaluation. This is the easy bit, because it was already in line with what Bierwisch proposed. Given his proposal that all evaluative adjectives are minimum standard, this means they are all related to excessives.

But what about positive evaluative adjectives? I would like to propose that they are universal in nature. So, being *nice* means being nice enough to warrant a positive evaluation. They are not maximum standard adjectives, though. They couldn't be because they fail the usual diagnostic, compatibility with maximizers like *completely*.

- (16) Luk's towel is completely dry.
- (17) #Luk is completely nice.

Maximizers like *completely* are not sensitive to the universal structure of the interpretation of the adjective, but rather to there being an endpoint to the scale. That the example in (17) is infelicitous is entirely parallel to other constructions that are universal, but do not involve an end-point:

- (18) #Luk is completely as tall as Mary.
- (19) #Luk is completely tall enough.

My suggestion that positive and negative evaluative adjectives are respectively universal and existential is probably very closely related to the proposal in Sassoon (2012) that multi-dimensional adjectives come in two flavours: those that require exceeding a standard in some dimension (*disjunctive* multidimensional adjectives) versus those that require exceeding a standard in every dimension (*conjunctive* multidimensional adjectives). The adjective *healthy* is conjunctive because being healthy requires being healthy in every possible respect. *Sick* on the other hand is disjunctive, since only being sick in *some* respect suffices. In a combined corpus and questionnaire study, Sassoon shows that the adjectives that participants view as *positive* tend to occur significantly more frequent with exception phrases over dimensions in the corpus. The contrast between (20) and (21) illustrates the relevant contrast.

(20) Except for her frequent headaches, she is healthy.

(21) #Except for her frequent headaches, she is sick.

This is in line with Sassoon's disjunctive (i.e. existential) versus conjunctive (i.e. universal) analysis, since it is well-known that exception phrases are only compatible with universals.

(22) Except for John, everyone came.

(23) #Except for John, some people came.

It is unclear to me whether my suggestion that evaluative adjectives are existential excessive constructions when negative and universal sufficiency constructions when positive is identical to Sassoon's proposal for the implicit existential or universal quantification over dimensions in the semantics of multidimensional adjectives. For starters, it is unclear to me whether what Bierwisch called evaluative adjectives is in practice always the same as what (Kamp, 1975) called multidimensional. The bigger picture is clear however. These classes of adjectives come in two flavours: those with properties akin to universal and those with properties akin to existential quantification. The former tend to be qualitatively *positives* while the latter tend to be *negative*. Diminishers go with negative adjectives because these are existential.

In summary, what I have done here is to try and connect Jaspers et al.'s suggestion that diminishers encode a negative preference with an otherwise preference for existential force. All this was necessary just to account for the contrast in (1)/(2). Of course, I have contributed nothing that comes close to an explanation of why this contrast would reverse in non-veridical environments in Dutch. I think that here lies a truly difficult challenge put forward by Jaspers et al. Perhaps to start working on that challenge we should look at what happens with universal degree constructions like those involving sufficiency. In line with our assumptions above, the combination of a diminisher and a sufficiency construction is infelicitous:

- (24) #De saus is een beetje dik genoeg.  
The sauce is a bit thick enough.

So what happens in non-veridical environments? I think the intuitions are encouraging: Imagine waiting impatiently to start a feast. All that is missing is the sauce. It needs to reduce a bit more so that it has a nice and thick pouring consistency. The roast potatoes are going cold, and so are the vegetables and the meat. You, the impatient speaker, are now very much entitled to exclaim:

- (25) Is hij nu al een beetje dik genoeg!?  
Is he now yet a bit thick enough

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