A new source of imprecision in the domain of gradable adjectives

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Joint work with Curtis Chen, Roger Levy and Elizabeth Coppock

When it comes to gradable adjectives, imprecision is usually discussed in the context of Maximum Standard Absolute adjectives (Kennedy, 2007; Syrett et al., 2010; Solt, 2015; Aparicio et al., 2015; Leffel et al., 2016; Gotzner et al., 2018; Qin, 2020, among many others). In this talk I argue that **definite comparatives** (e.g., 'the *bigger* circle') can also give rise to pragmatic reasoning about imprecision, regardless of whether the corresponding positive form is relative or absolute. On the basis of corpus and experimental evidence, I argue that the acceptability of definite comparatives is contingent on the cardinality of the degrees represented in the comparison class used for their interpretation. In particular, it is proposed that definite comparatives encode the presupposition that the cardinality of the adjectival degrees represented in the comparison class must be of *two*. Our experimental results suggest that in order to satisfy this presuppositional requirement, listeners flexibly consider different granularity scales (Krifka, 2007, 2009) that map the individuals in the comparison class to sets of degrees in the relevant adjectival scale. Reasoning about imprecision is nevertheless subject to constraints: our results show that the acceptability of definite comparatives is inversely proportional to the number of granularities that lead to reference failure. Therefore, much like we observe in other domains where granularities play a role, reasoning about imprecision is a tradeoff between satisfying the meaning of the comparative adjective and minimizing pragmatic weakening. Time allowing, I will also discuss results from computational simulations that investigate further constraints on the space of granularities considered, and the representational claims made by our theory regarding whether we should think of these granularities as being grounded in the semantics of definite comparatives.