Vacuity and competition in models of intensification
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Cliff's law (Cliff 1956) states that the effect of degree adverbs is multiplicative in nature. Different adverbs contribute different values with which to multiply and, as such, boost or mitigate the meaning of the adjective to different extents. One could take Cliff's law as stating that the semantic contribution of individual intensifiers *is* this intensification factor. Alternatively, one could follow Bennett and Goodman (2018) in proposing that intensifiers are semantically vacuous and that the boosting factor is the result of M-implicatures triggered by the added utterance cost of the addition of the intensifier. Either way, proposals like these share the idea that intensifiers like "very", "terribly" and "extremely" have a rather poor lexical semantic content. This view may be supported by the somewhat surprising finding that intensifiers seem indeed vacuous when their meaning is probed in experiments with a between-subject design (Moxey and Sanford 1993, O'Muircheartaigh et al 1993, and Wright et al 1995).

On the other hand, there are cases of intensification where it seems clear that the intensifier is not semantically vacuous. While the underlying adjective in adverbs like "terribly" plays no semantic role in combination with adjectives (it is odd for something to be at the same time terrible and nice, but no such oddness arises from calling someone "terribly nice"), things are different for evaluative adverbs that have not undergone a similar bleaching process. "X is disgustingly nice", for instance, clearly communicates that there's some element of disgust in the speaker's judgment of how nice X is. In Nouwen (2020), I show that even some bleached intensifiers show remnants of such semantic effects. Modifiers of high degree tend to be derived from evaluative adjectives expressing negative evaluations ("terribly", "awfully"), while modifiers with a more mitigating effect tend to be derived from adjectives with a positive connotation ("fairly", "pretty").

In this talk I will explore the degree of semantic poverty of various intensifiers in the context of RSA-style models of vague predication (Lassiter & Goodman, Qing & Franke). How can we do justice to the varied ways in which attenuating/boosting effects come about if we suppose that vague interpretation, including the vagueness of intensification, is probabilistic in nature? Can we maintain the same overall model of vague predicate interpretation, yet have intensification effects caused by both content-rich as well as semantically poor mechanisms? So far, I am optimistic about this possibility.

References
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