Abstract: Maximality, Minimality and Absoluteness in Delineation Semantics for Gradable Predicates

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In the literature on gradable predicates, "supervaluationist" accounts of degree phenomena—in which gradable adjectives are analyzed as vague predicates—have been argued to flounder on the data of absolute gradable adjectives like *empty/full* and *open/closed* (Burnett 2014, Kennedy 2007). Absolute gradable adjectives show some properties that distinguish them from relative gradable adjectives like *tall, clever, sweet*. For instance, they are generally not vague or context-sensitive (a door is *closed* if it is maximally closed, cf. *tall*), and they can occur with endpoint-oriented modifiers like *completely* (*completely closed* vs. #*completely tall*).

In this presentation, I develop a "plurivaluationist" framework for natural language semantics, a mathematical setting in which both ambiguity and gradability manifest as consequences of a language having multiple possible interpretations (Burnett 2014, Klein 1980, van Rooij 2011). A primary difficulty for theories of this type has been to explain the scale properties of absolute gradable adjectives—i.e. the existence of maximal/minimal elements. In particular, if gradable adjectives denote vague, context-sensitive predicates as the supervaluationists claim, how can one derive—apart from stipulative syntactic restrictons—the truth conditions and presuppositions of modifiers like *completely* that presuppose endpoints on a scale?

To answer this challenge, I present an intensional semantics for gradable predicates in which scale properties are stated as conditions on the set of admissible interpretations for a language—namely, that absolute gradable adjectives have maximal or minimal interpretations. I show that these conditions are coherent when gradable predicates have intensional denotations—i.e. where predicates are in $D_{e\to(s\to t)}$—and in general incoherent when the semantics is not intensional, which leads to correct predictions for sentences like #*The glass is full but it could be fuller* (van Rooij 2011). The framework I present explains the absolute-relative distinction and also provide a highly general degree-free theoretical toolkit for the analysis of gradability and ambiguity.