Metalinguistic Comparison in an Alternative Semantics for Imprecision

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Despite all the attention the semantics of comparatives has received, there seems to be no formal account of 'metalinguistic' comparatives such as *more dumb than ugly* or *more a semanticist than a syntactician*. This paper proposes one, built on the intuition that these structures do not compare along scales introduced by gradable adjectives—as ordinary comparatives do—but rather along a scale of *(im)precision*, or of how much pragmatic 'slack' must be afforded to judge an expression 'close enough to true'. This is expressed by reformulating the pragmatic-halos theory of imprecision (Lasersohn 1999) in terms of a Hamblin-style alternative semantics (Hamblin 1973) in a way that allows degrees of imprecision—roughly, 'halo size'—to be directly compared.

These 'metalinguistic' comparatives (the term is not ideal) differ from ordinary comparatives in a number of significant ways. The clearest of these is that they cannot be formed with *-er*, as the contrast between (1) and (2) shows. They can also occur with a *than* phrase consisting of an adjective alone, as (1) also reflects. This is not normally possible with ordinary comparatives. And unlike ordinary comparatives, these comparatives occur across a broad range of categories, as (3) reflects, where they manifest a distinct and idiosyncratic syntax. Notably, they allow comparison between adjectives with distinct scales, as (1) also shows. In ordinary comparatives, this is possible only on a comparison-of-deviation reading (Kennedy 1997), as in (4). But an example such as (4a) entails that George is dumb and Dick crazy; there is, however, no corresponding entailment in the 'metalinguistic' comparative in (1a), which can be true even if George is *neither* dumb nor crazy.

The account here is rooted in the theory of imprecision or pragmatic 'slack' of Lasersohn (1999), who shows in detail (as Kennedy 2007 a.o. also argues) that imprecision is distinct from truth-conditional vagueness. A predicate such as *tall* is vague, but *six feet tall* is not. However, *six feet tall*, though perfectly truth-conditionally precise, is normally interpreted by allowing a certain amount of leeway: we take *six feet tall*, when predicated of someone who is $5'\,11.99''$, to be close enough to true, even if not absolutely true. Thus there is a 'pragmatic halo' around *six feet tall*.

To construct an account of 'metalinguistic' comparison, though, it is helpful to reformulate Lasersohn's insights into a novel framework that models Lasersohnian halos using Hamblin alternatives. An expression α is interpreted wrt a context C and a degree of precision d, a real number in $[0\text{–}1]$. As (5) exemplifies, a predicate interpreted with maximal precision is a singleton set consisting of its core denotation. At lower levels of precision, the set expands to include other predicates of the same type, which differ only in ways that are 'pragmatically ignorable' in C, as the denotation in (6) reflects and (7) further illustrates. Normal Hamblin-style principles of semantic composition ensure that these 'halos' expand in the appropriate way. Metalinguistic *more* can now be understood to have the denotation in (8), which requires that the maximum precision level at which there is among the alternatives to α a property true of x be greater than the corresponding maximum for β. This resembles standard denotations for ordinary *more*, but it is appropriately syntactically cross-categorial. It also correctly predicts that neither of the compared predicates need necessarily be true of the subject, so long as the first is 'closer to' being true or perfectly precise than the second.

On this view, these comparatives aren't 'metalinguistic' in any extragrammatical sense, as may also be the case for metalinguistic negation (Potts 2007). Thus this advances a broader *grammatical* understanding of 'metalinguistic' phenomena. Moreover, the model of imprecision this relies on may shed further light on the semantic role of alternatives, adding to the increasing inventory of domains in which they may be implicated (questions (Hamblin 1973), focus (Rooth 1985), pronouns (Kratzer & Shimoyama 2002), disjunction (Alonso-Ovalle 2006), scalar implicatures (Keshet 2006), and no doubt others). Finally, it may help clarify the sometimes slippery distinction between vagueness and imprecision with a novel conception of 'halos', and with the hypothesis that ordinary comparatives manipulate degrees at the former level, and metalinguistic ones at the latter.

Examples

(1) a. George is more dumb than crazy.
b. Dick is more crazy than dumb.

(2) a. *George is dumber than crazy.
b. *Dick is crazier than dumb.

(3) a. A chimp is more $\left\{\begin{array}{l}[_{DP} \text{ an ape}] \text{ than } [_{DP} \text{ a monkey}] \\ [_{NP} \text{ ape}] \text{ than } [_{NP} \text{ monkey}]\end{array}\right\}$.
b. I am more $[_{NP}$ machine] now than $[_{NP}$ man]. *(attested, Darth Vader, mid-'80s)*
c. George is more $[_{AP}$ afraid of Dick] than $[_{PP}$ in love with him].
d. George more $[_{VP}$ felt the answer] than $[_{VP}$ knew it].

(4) a. George is dumber than Dick is crazy.
b. Dick is crazier than George is dumb.

(5) for every context C: $[\![\textit{dumb}]\!]^{1,C} = \{\lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is dumb in } w]\}$
$[\![\textit{dumb}]\!]^{0,C} = D_{\langle e,st\rangle}$

(6) $[\![\textit{dumb}]\!]^{d,C} = \{f_{\langle e,st\rangle} : f \approx_{d,C} \lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is dumb in } w]\}$
where $\alpha \approx_{d,C} \beta$ iff α resembles β to degree d given the ordering in context C

(7) $[\![\textit{dumb}]\!]^{0.8,C} = \{f_{\langle e,st\rangle} : f \approx_{0.8,C} \lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is dumb in } w]\} = \left\{\begin{array}{l}\lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is dumb in } w], \\ \lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is ignorant in } w], \\ \lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is dopey in } w], \\ \lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is foolhardy in } w], \\ \lambda x \lambda w[x \text{ is foolish in } w], \\ \vdots\end{array}\right\}$

(8) $[\![\textit{more}_m \ \alpha \ \textit{than} \ \beta]\!]^{d,C} = \left\{ \lambda x \lambda w \left[\begin{array}{c} max\{d' : \exists f[f \in [\![\alpha]\!]^{d',C} \wedge f(x)(w) = 1]\} > \\ max\{d'' : \exists g[g \in [\![\beta]\!]^{d'',C} \wedge g(x)(w) = 1]\} \end{array} \right] \right\}$

(9) $[\![\textit{more}_m \textit{ dumb than crazy}]\!]^{d,C} = \left\{ \lambda x \lambda w \left[\begin{array}{c} max\{d' : \exists f[f \in [\![\textit{dumb}]\!]^{d',C} \wedge f(x)(w) = 1]\} > \\ max\{d'' : \exists g[g \in [\![\textit{crazy}]\!]^{d'',C} \wedge g(x)(w) = 1]\} \end{array} \right] \right\}$

$= \left\{ \lambda x \lambda w \left[\begin{array}{c} max\{d' : \exists f[f \approx_{d',C} \lambda y \lambda w'[y \text{ is dumb in } w'] \wedge f(y)(w) = 1]\} > \\ max\{d'' : \exists g[g \approx_{d'',C} \lambda y \lambda w'[y \text{ is crazy in } w'] \wedge g(x)(w) = 1]\} \end{array} \right] \right\}$

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