

That's so NP! The case for gradable individuals*

This work in progress aims at giving an analysis of one particular construction in English, which we believe to be important for a number of deep questions about gradability of nouns, adjectives and the nature of the differences between the two.

The construction we are concerned with is illustrated by the following examples from the web (as well as by the title of the abstract):

- (1) Matching shirt and hat is so McDonalds. (\approx cheap, unfashionable)
- (2) Buying DVDs is so 2004! (\approx out-of-date)
- (3) Yeah, that is so Obama! (\approx cool)

The characteristic properties of the construction are: a) a noun phrase in the predicate position; b) a degree item *so* in preposition to this NP.

The most puzzling in this situation is, first of all, the mere possibility of this combination. Typically the position taken by an NP in (1-3) is filled by a gradable adjective rather than a noun. Near-synonymous substitutions that are given in parentheses are also gradable adjectives. So the question is, what is going on in this construction – semantically and syntactically – that allows nouns to occupy the position they are not supposed to occupy.

The first possibility is that we are dealing with **gradable nouns** (see Morzycki to appear and work cited there). The analysis we use states two distinct Deg heads that project different phrases; one is Deg_N (for gradable nouns) and the other is Deg_A (for gradable adjectives). They differ distributionally, and we can see that our construction patterns with gradable adjectives rather than with gradable nouns, thus, there is a Deg_A inside, and the whole phrase is Deg_{AP}:

- (4) George is a(n) {enormous/big/huge/slight/minor/*so/#pretty/*very/*so very/*rather} idiot.
- (5) Matching shirt and hat is {*enormous/*big/*huge/*slight/*minor/so/pretty/very/so very/rather} {McDonalds/cheap}.
- (6) How very {Obama/*idiot/cool/cheap}!

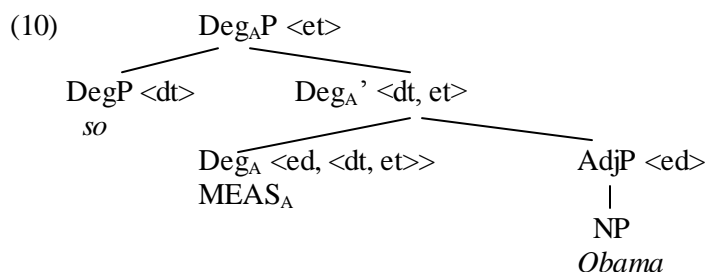
In short, *McDonalds*, *Obama* and *2004* are true gradable adjectives, which is further supported by a *seem*-test (see Kennedy and McNally 2005 and the work cited there) and coordination with gradable adjectives:

- (7) He {is/seems/felt/became} so Obama!
- (8) The martini always seems so James Bond, so “Sex in the City,” so elegant.

The pattern in (7) is a test for adjectiveness, and it also helps to differentiate between the construction we are discussing and a construction that sometimes looks similar but has a VP-modifying *so*. Interestingly, it's only the proper names and definite description (i.e., type <e>) that pass the test:¹

- (9) This {is/*seems} so a vegan brownie!

What we have by now is summarized in a tree modified from Morzycki to appear:



A noun of type <e> occupies a position of type <e,d> (a function from individuals to degrees, i.e., a gradable property). Let's try to see how it happens.

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¹ For a discussion of new and noncanonical uses of *so* see a topic on Linguist List: <http://linguistlist.org/ask-ling/message-details2.cfm?AsklingID=200430661>

Sentences (1-3) together with their adjective paraphrases suggest that the nouns here do not refer to the individuals at all – rather, they refer to their most prominent property. Say, McDonalds is cheap, 2004 was long ago, and Obama is cool. Unlike the other construction ‘That’s Alice for you!’, you don’t have to actually refer to the individual you name; say, (11) is about Jessica Biel having big hair:

(11) This is so Madonna at golden globes (when she won for Evita)!

A familiar type-shifting mechanism can give us a desired correspondence between an individual and the set of its properties (both gradable and not), but we do not need all of them for this use, there is something else going on that leaves most of them aside.

An inviting possibility is the idea of ‘**restricted individuals**’ (Landman 1989) – the possibility to refer to a subset of properties an individual has (i.e., ‘John as a judge’):

(12) If t is a term and P is a predicate then $t \restriction P$ is an expression... $t \restriction P$ is going to denote t restricted to its aspect of having P . (Landman 1989: 731)

The idea seems quite relevant to our case, but doesn’t quite fit. While $t \restriction P$ is still a set of properties, in our construction it is always a singleton, otherwise it couldn’t be measured (see Morzycki to appear for discussion). What is going on in our case rather reminds of the Choice Functions (CFs) (see Reinhart 1997; Kratzer 1998) – a function that takes a set as its input and gives a member of this set as its output. We can define a CF we need in such a way that it takes a set of gradable properties (that are functions from individuals to degrees) and gives one of these properties as its output:²

(13) $f_{\langle\langle ed \rangle, t \rangle, ed}$ is a CF if $P_{\langle\langle ed \rangle, t \rangle} (f(P_{\langle\langle ed \rangle, t \rangle})) = 1$

Which of the properties will be picked is a matter of contextual support – say, Obama in (3) can be constructed to mean a variety of properties depending on the context.

We are not able to provide a particular location of the CF that is used, and do not claim that they are the actual mechanism for this shift, but we believe it to be a good approximation to the process as we see it: a set of properties might be viewed so that one of it gets salient and prominent, and the rest are set aside as irrelevant; this one salient property is defined contextually. Basically, it’s what CFs do.

Besides, there are other cases that call for the similar tool (from De Clercq 2008):

(14) She did a (*very) Britney.

(15) She did a very Britney thing.

Summary. We analyze the construction ‘That’s so + NP’ as involving a type shift from individuals to sets of their properties and a choice function that picks a contextually salient member of the set – a gradable property, which is then treated by the Deg_A head in a way it treats gradable adjectives.

Further issues. Why can’t a gradable noun occupy the very same position (see (4-6))? If it is of the same type $\langle ed \rangle$, why gradable nouns and ‘gradable individuals’ / gradable adjectives differ distributionally and are associated with different Deg morphemes? And why, after all, gradable individuals act like gradable adjectives rather than gradable nouns (which we could expect)? What’s the difference between nouns and adjectives?

References

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² We assume that if a set of properties of the individual contain only non-gradable ones, the CF will be undefined and the sentence with *so* will not be well-formed, but we won’t discuss it here.