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Scalar moderation in Lithuanian adjectives

PROBLEM

In Lithuanian, prefix *po-* when attached to adjectives, can derive the following meanings, listed in the order of most to least productive based on Tamulionienė's study (2013:135-137):

(1)

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|---|---|
| a. 'average amount of property x' | aštrus
'sharp' | → | <i>po</i> aštris
'rather sharp' |
| b. 'a little of property x'; | baisus
'terrifying' | → | <i>po</i> baisis
'a little terrifying' |
| c. 'almost property x'; | šviesus
'light' | → | <i>po</i> šviesis
'almost light' |
| d. 'too much of property x' | siauras
'narrow' | → | <i>po</i> siauris
'too narrow' |

QUESTION 1

Tamulionienė (2013) observes that *po-* derives indefiniteness of scale of a property at issue. I concur. However, that cannot be the whole story. Variance in productivity notwithstanding, how can one account for the range of meanings in (1), assuming that 'rather' ≠ 'a little' ≠ 'almost' ≠ 'too much'?

QUESTION 2

Having observed the variance, why are certain derivations, such as, e.g., in (2), not possible?

- (2) a. **po*medinis b. **po*nėščia
pref-wooden pref-pregnant

PROPOSAL

I posit that *po-* is a **moderator** of scale when applied to adjectives. This view is in line with the indefiniteness of scale interpretation proposed by Tamulionienė (2013). In addition, it predicts the range of meanings.

CLAIM 1

The range of meanings that Tamulionienė (2013) lists is due to the relativization of scale. (i) Semantics inherent to adjectives and (ii) pragmatic context make this relativization possible.

The range of meanings in (1) corresponds to possibilities allowed for adjectives of distinct scalarity, under the view that adjectives split into open, relative and absolute (in the sense of Kennedy 2007, Kennedy & McNally 2005). Moderator prefix *po-* interacts with the inherent scalar specification of a particular adjective giving rise to a

specific meaning, e.g., ‘rather’ or ‘a little’ or ‘almost’ or ‘too much’. This means that the Lithuanian moderator prefix is underspecified: until it adjoins a particular adjective, its scalar effect simply cannot be known. In this sense, it contrasts with, e.g., English, where a particular scalar moderator corresponds to a particular lexical entry.

Pragmatics play a role in that some of the data examples can be interpreted as having more than one interpretation. Based on native speaker judgements, distinction between ‘a little’ and ‘rather’ can be blurred. For instance, (1a) for *poaštris* could mean either ‘rather sharp’ or ‘a little sharp’.

CLAIM 2

The ungrammaticality of (2) is also predicted under the view of scalar moderation. Specifically, *po-* does not introduce scale, it only moderates it. Thus, scale moderator cannot adjoin to adjectives that are not scalar. Properties such as, e.g., ‘wooden’ or ‘pregnant’ fall outside scalarity: something is either wooden or not, pregnant or not.

Selected references

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