

INTRODUCTION AND DATA: While verbs can become associated with degrees, less clear is that verbs themselves lexicalize a degree argument. Caudal and Nicolas (2005) and Piñón (2008) have argued that degree arguments in verbs are quite pervasive. More recently, however, Rett (to appear) has argued that verbs do not in fact have degree arguments. In this paper I propose a new diagnostic to test whether a verb has a degree argument using *sort of*, ending with the conclusion that most verbs do not have degree arguments. A basic question that arises is how gradability in the verbal domain happens without degrees. I show how *sort of* operates over a degree scale in the case of adjectives, and a scale of alternatives for verbs.

Sort of is a hedge that may modify both verbs (1) and adjectives (2). Bolinger (1972) notes that *sort of* allows for two different senses of meaning, the IDENTIFICATION and INTENSIFICATION senses. The identification sense signals a mismatch between form and meaning (as in 1a). The intensification sense is a degree reading, where *sort of* signals that a property holds to some degree (as in 2a). These can be distinguished from each other by “rigging the context with a clause that denies identification” (Bolinger, 1972, p. 220). If the identification sense is present, the follow-up clause is coherent (3). However, a follow-up is odd if the intensification sense is present (4).

To generalize, *sort of* gets an intensification reading with adjectives and an identification reading with verbs. But, there exist verbs where *sort of* has an intensification reading, such as in (5). These verbs drive my conclusion that some verbs *do* have degree arguments, due to their patterning like adjectives.

BACKGROUND: Popular analyses of adjectives propose that adjectives are lexically endowed with a degree argument, making adjectives type $\langle d, \langle e, st \rangle \rangle$. This degree argument is saturated by a null morpheme POS, which asserts that the degree to which the property denoted by the adjective holds meets or exceeds a contextually determined standard (Kennedy, 1999; Kennedy & McNally, 2005). The POS morpheme is realized as a degree head, projecting a DegP structure over the AP. Verbs are not often argued to carry degree arguments and are not argued to have a DegP projection.

Morzycki (2011) develops tools for comparing verb meanings. For him, interpretations are parameterized to degrees of precision. Denotations are sets of Hamblin alternatives corresponding to Lasnik’s pragmatic halos (Lasnik, 1999), with the halos expanding or contracting depending on the degree of precision in interpretation. This generates a set of imprecision alternatives which resemble the interpreted object to at least degree d . The alternatives are constructed using the \approx “resembles” relation, defined in (6). To illustrate this, the verb *swim* is represented as in (7), where the degree of precision has been lowered.

ANALYSIS: Intuitively, *sort of* lowers the standard for which a predicate holds. Formally, *sort of* combines with a gradable predicate G and provides a degree that meets the lowered standard **standard**_{sort of} (8). For adjectives, *sort of* says the adjective holds to this degree. Like a common degree word, *sort of* operates over a degree scale in the adjectival domain.

Most verbs cannot combine directly with *sort of*, due to being the wrong type. A typeshift PREC (9) lifts the VP to type $\langle d, \langle e, st \rangle \rangle$ and simultaneously opens up the degree of precision parameter for further composition. *Sort of* provides a degree that meets **standard**_{sort of}, which is set as the degree of precision to which the VP is interpreted. *Sort of* picks from among the scale of imprecision alternatives that resemble the object denoted by the VP, rather than making use of a degree scale.

For verbs that admit intensification readings, no PREC typeshift is needed; *sort of* may combine directly with these verbs, as it does with adjectives. Gradability is over a degree scale for these verbs, and not over a scale of imprecision alternatives. Due to the similarities in composition, verbs with degree arguments will be predicted to behave like adjectives with respect to whether they get an intensification reading.

CONCLUSION: I argue that the modifier *sort of* can serve as a diagnostic for whether a verb has a degree argument, based on the existence of an intensification reading. This shows that some verbs have degree arguments and some do not. Furthermore, my analysis shows that although the adjectival domain has degree scales as its source of gradability, the verbal domain has an additional source of gradability, namely scales of imprecision alternatives.

- (1) a. The boy sort of swam over to the boat. (=did something like swimming)
b. The crowd sort of sang songs. (=did something like singing songs)
- (2) a. My dentist is sort of tall.
b. This canyon is sort of wide.
- (3) *Identification readings with verbs*
a. He sort of stood up — not really, because he was still in a crouching position, but he was close to it. (Bolinger, 1972, p. 220)
b. The boy sort of swam over to the boat. Not really swam, but something like it.
- (4) *Intensification readings with adjectives*
a. *My dentist is sort of tall. Not really, he just looks it.
b. *This shade of paint is sort of red. Not really, it just looks red.
- (5) *Intensification readings with verbs*
a. *I sort of worried you might need more - not really, because deep inside I knew better, but still I felt that concern. (Bolinger, 1972, p. 220)
b. *He sort of likes you — not really, he just looks that way. (Bolinger, 1972, p. 239)
- (6) $\alpha \approx_{d,C} \beta$ iff, given the ordering imposed by the context C , α resembles β to (at least) degree d and α and β are the same type. (d is a real number in the interval $[0, 1]$)
- (7) $\llbracket \text{swim} \rrbracket^{9,C} = \{f_{\langle e,st \rangle} : f \approx_{9,C} \text{swim}\} = \{\text{swim}, \text{float}, \text{wade}, \dots\}$
- (8) $\llbracket \text{sort of} \rrbracket = \lambda G_{\langle d, \langle e,st \rangle \rangle} \lambda x \lambda w \exists d [d \geq \text{standard}_{\text{sort of}}(G) \wedge \exists f \in G(d) [f(x)(w)]]$
where $\text{standard}_{\text{sort of}}$ is a contextually defined standard for a gradable predicate,
and $\forall G [\text{standard}_{\text{sort of}}(G) < \text{standard}(G)]$
- (9) $\llbracket \text{PREC } \alpha \rrbracket^d = \lambda d' . \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{d'}$
- (10) $\llbracket \text{sorta PREC swim} \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda w \exists d [d \geq \text{standard}_{\text{sort of}}(G) \wedge \exists f \in \llbracket \text{PREC swim} \rrbracket(d) [f(x)(w)]]$
$$= \lambda x \lambda w \exists d [d \geq \text{standard}_{\text{sort of}}(G) \wedge \exists f \in \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{swim}, \\ \text{float}, \\ \text{wade}, \\ \dots \end{array} \right\} [f(x)(w)]]$$

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