What does really really mean?: Prosody and gradience in dialogue

Catherine Lai, Department of Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania, laic@ling.upenn.edu

Questions
• How do we model gradable beliefs in dialogue?
• How does this relate to other uses of degrees and standards in semantics?
• How does this relate to prosodic variability?

Cue words, really and levels of belief
• Cue words reflect levels of certainty of dialogue participants.
  – right, yeah ← agree, really ← check, okay ← accept,...
• This affects dialogue structures: QUD, public beliefs,...
• Levels of belief seem to vary with prosody:
  – prosodic gradience ≈ gradability in dialogue structures?
  – This would give a measure, but what’s the scale?
• Really provides a test case for modelling gradability in dialogue.

Evidence, evaluation & the kernel
• von Fintel and Gillies (2009): epistemic modals signal inference from direct evidence, i.e. “the kernel”.
• Davis et al. (2007): Asserting p: C_{X}(p) > c, quality threshold.
  – Evidentials change threshold c,
  – This looks like a gradable adjective (Kennedy and McNally, 2005)
• Proposal:
  ⇒ Generalized kernel K: propositions in the CB that are highly ranked
  ⇒ i.e. important, relevant to the QUD.
  ⇒ Evidence is weighted by probabilities.
  ⇒ This dynamically determines K.
  ⇒ Utterances are evaluated w.r.t. K.

⇒ Really and VERUM manage the kernel.
⇒ Really (p): evaluation of p beats the standard.

Realities
Romero and Han (2004) separate different uses of really:
(1) a. A: The lines are straight
   B: really? / really! (cue word)
  b. The lines really are straight. (epistemic)
  c. The lines ARE really straight. (actuality)
  d. The lines are really long. (intensifier)
  e. The lines look curved, but they’re really straight.

To get ‘reality’ you might need to discount direct evidence!
⇒ Really raises the standard of evidence: propositions that don’t meet this standard are dropped from the kernel.
⇒ Expanding the evaluation domain reduces likelihood of ‘accidentally’ exceeding the standard.
⇒ Less assumptions → more general results!

Really raising standards
(2) K_i ⊂ K, a higher standard of evidence,
   a. ||really||G(x) = ∃ d > std(S_C) ∧ G(d(x))
   b. ||really||C_{X,K}(p) = ∃ d > c_i ∧ C_{X,K}(p) = d,
      i.e. C_{X,K}(p) > c_i

⇒ VERUM foregrounds evidence rather than just being a downdata mechanism (Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miro, 2009).

References

Foregounding with VERUM
• R&H: epistemic [really] = ||VERUM||, c.f. bias in NPQs.
• Really can co-occur with VERUM focus, e.g. (1-b), (1-c)
• However, really bias is different:
  (7) a. Are there really some vegan restaurants here?
   b. Aren’t there some vegan restaurants here? (bias yes)
   c. Aren’t there any vegan restaurants here? (bias no)
   d. Aren’t there really (some/no/*any) vegan restaurants here?
• VERUM marks (8-b) as important for the evaluation of (8-a).
   b. B: She DOES get all stupid when he comes to visit,
   c. B: but I think that’s just because he’s famous.

⇒ VERUM foregrounds evidence rather than just being a downdata mechanism (Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miro, 2009).

Cue words vs VERUM prosody
(10) a. VERUM + yeah(p), right(p); p has high probability
   ⇒ p is important evidence for resolving the QUD.
   b. VERUM + okay(action a): a taps the to-do list
   ⇒ a=DOWNDATE(p) ⇒ Move on!
   c. VERUM + really(p): Adding p non-trivially alters K.
   ⇒ Establish a higher standard before downdata.

⇒ To do: Map the phonetics w.r.t. QUD resolution, Source attribution, evidential ranking...

• We can treat gradability of beliefs in the same way as other types of semantic gradability.
• Really and VERUM are linguistic tools for managing dialogue level structures, aside from at-issue content.
• This suggests multidimensionality, but does this mean conventional implicature?