Aesthetic Adjectives Lack Uniform Behavior[*]

Shen-yi Liao, Louise McNally, Aaron Meskin

The goal of this short paper is to show that aesthetic adjectives—exemplified by "beautiful" and "elegant"—do not pattern stably on a range of linguistic diagnostics that have been used to taxonomize the gradability properties of adjectives. We argue that a plausible explanation for this puzzling data involves distinguishing two properties of gradable adjectives that have been frequently conflated: whether an adjective's applicability is sensitive to a *comparison class*, and whether an adjective's applicability is *context-dependent*.

§1 introduces the distinction now commonly made in the linguistics literature between relative and absolute gradable adjectives (Kennedy and McNally 2005): very roughly, relative gradable adjectives have varying standards of application, but absolute gradable adjectives do not.

§2 uses an experiment to introduce a new diagnostic, *the question felicity test*, which shows that aesthetic adjectives do not behave like relative gradable adjectives. §3 presents corpus data involving "for" phrases consistent with the experimental results. But then §4 discusses three other existing diagnostics, two on which aesthetic adjectives do behave like relative gradable adjectives and another on which, again, they do not.

§5 presents an explanation of the collectively puzzling data. The key insight of this explanation is that we must distinguish two senses in which a gradable adjective might be called "relative". Aesthetic adjectives are like relative gradable adjectives in one sense—their standards of application derive from comparison classes—but they are unlike relative gradable adjectives in another sense—the relevant comparison classes are not contingent on the immediate situational context.

1. Relative and Absolute Gradable Adjectives

Gradable adjectives can be operationally defined as adjectives that can be modified by comparative constructions (e.g. "more [adj.] than…"). A core parameter in the typology of gradable adjectives concerns their context-sensitivity. Some gradable adjectives, such as "long" and "tall", are typically interpreted relative to a contextually-determined comparison class. Other gradable adjectives, such as

"spotted" and "flat", typically are not. Following Kennedy and McNally (2005), we will call the former kind *relative gradable adjectives* (or "relative" for short) and the latter kind *absolute gradable adjectives* (or "absolute" for short).[1]

The majority, if not all, of evaluative aesthetic adjectives—exemplified by "beautiful" and "elegant"—are gradable adjectives, as seen in the fact that they appear in comparative constructions (e.g. "Lionel Messi's style of play is more beautiful than Cristiano Ronaldo's").[2] In assessing aesthetic adjectives' place within the gradable adjective taxonomy, we will focus on diagnostics that have been used to distinguish between relative and *all varieties* of absolute gradable adjectives.[3] We will show that aesthetic adjectives pattern unstably—sometimes like relative adjectives and other times not—with respect to a range of diagnostics.[4]

2. Question Felicity

Recall that while relative adjectives are typically interpreted relative to a contextually-determined comparison class, absolute adjectives typically are not. The *question felicity test* makes use of the following premise: because the standard for an absolute adjective does not depend on a contextually-determined comparison class, it should as a rule make sense to ask whether an absolute adjective can be predicated of an object without further qualification. In contrast, if relative adjectives cannot be ascribed without taking into account a comparison class, it should typically makes less sense to ask whether an object can be truthfully described with a relative adjective unless a unique relevant comparison class is salient in the context. The reason is that, with relative adjectives, different comparison classes might deliver conflicting verdicts. Whenever there is this indeterminacy of comparison classes, the

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[1] Dichotomizing gradable adjectives thusly is, of course, a simplification. First, it ignores distinctions between three kinds of absolute adjectives: *lower-closed* (minimal-standard), *upper-closed* (maximal standard), and *closed* (minimal- and maximal-standard) (cf. Cruse 1986; Kamp and Rossdeutscher 1994; Yoon 1996; Rotstein and Winter 2004; Kennedy and McNally 2005). Second, it ignores a kind of context sensitivity exhibited in so-called "loose talk", such as calling France "hexagonal" (cf., e.g., Unger 1975; Lewis 1979; Lasersohn 1999; Kennedy 2007).

[2] Sibley (1959) famously characterizes aesthetic terms as those expressions which require "taste or perceptiveness" for their application in ordinary or critical discourse. Sibley's examples of terms that predominantly function this way include "graceful", "delicate", "dainty", "handsome", "comely", "elegant", and "garish". There has been a longstanding debate among aestheticians about Sibley's characterization of aesthetic terms (cf., Kivy 1973; Cohen 1973). In particular, as Sibley himself noted and is commonly acknowledged, there can be non-aesthetic uses of characteristically aesthetic terms, as well as aesthetic uses of characteristically non-aesthetic terms. However there is general agreement that there is an important category of adjectives or associated concepts that are central to the criticism and evaluation of art. We have chosen two relatively uncontroversial characteristically aesthetic terms: "beautiful" and "elegant".

[3] Toledo and Sassoon (2011) and Burnett (2012) provide helpful summaries of the diagnostics that have been proposed in the literature. As Burnett notes, some diagnostics only distinguish between, say, relative and one species of absolute adjectives. For example, while the *accentuation test* (Kennedy 2007; cf. Unger 1975) distinguishes relative adjectives from upper-closed absolute adjectives, it fails to distinguish relative adjectives from lower-closed absolute adjectives.

[4] One diagnostic that we will not discuss in this paper is Kristen Syrett and colleagues' *presupposition assessment task* (Syrett *et al.* 2006, 2010). Using multiple experimental studies, Liao and Meskin (in press) show that aesthetic adjectives exhibit a pattern of behavior on the presupposition assessment task that is in between relative and absolute adjectives' patterns of behavior. In other words, on this diagnostic it behaves neither like relative nor like absolute adjectives. This puzzling behavior is, in fact, the original motivation for our current investigation into aesthetic adjectives' behavior on other diagnostics.

question of whether an adjective can be predicated of an object should generate some hesitancy or puzzlement—that is, it will be somewhat difficult for addressee to make sense of the question without further qualification.[5]

For example, when presented with a round disc with thirty-seven spots on it and a 10-cm diameter, the question

> (1)   Is this spotted?   [absolute]

is entirely felicitous insofar as it can be answered without reference to any additional information from the context. However, the question

> (2)   Is this big?   [relative]

is expected to be somewhat puzzling—that is, to be harder to make sense of than (1)—because in order to answer it, the addressee will need to know the answer to a second question: "Compared to what?". Our intuition is that aesthetic adjectives pattern as absolute on this diagnostic: it makes every bit as much sense to ask

> (3)   Is this beautiful?   [aesthetic]

as it does to ask (1).

To test whether ordinary English speakers share our intuition, we conducted an experimental study online to show that aesthetic adjectives pattern as absolute on the question felicity test.[6]

For this study, we used the following object / adjective combinations:

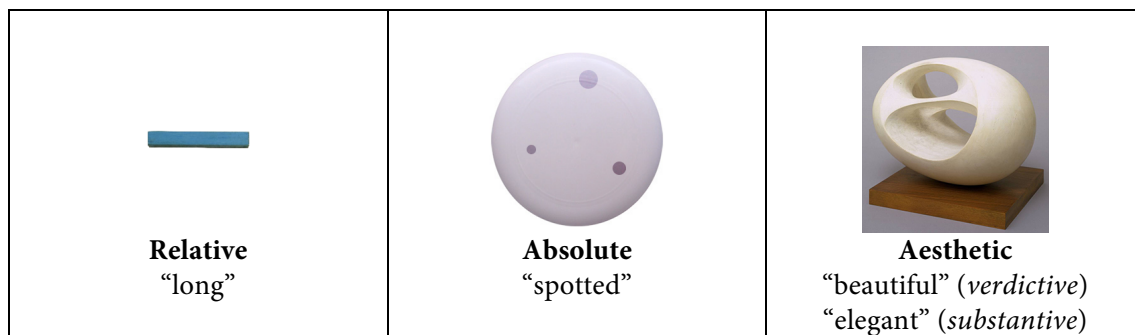| **Relative**
"long" | **Absolute**
"spotted" | **Aesthetic**
"beautiful" (*verdictive*)
"elegant" (*substantive*) |

Figure 1: Stimuli for the Question Felicity Test Study

Participants were shown, in random order, each object and the corresponding question "Is this [long / spotted / beautiful / elegant]?" shown in **Figure 1**.

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[5] There is another possible cause of the question not making sense: the presence of a category mistake. For example, it does not make sense to ask whether the number 42 is spotted. Hence, a background assumption of the question felicity test is that there is no category mistake involved in the question.

[6] 50 US-based paid participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk. After excluding participants who failed an instructional manipulation check (cf. Oppenheimer *et al.* 2009), 45 participants remained (median age = 38; 66.7% women).

Participants were then asked to make a *question felicity* judgment, concerning whether it makes sense to ask the question shown. Participants responded to the statement "It makes sense to ask this question" on a 7-point scale that is anchored from strongly disagree (= 1) to strongly agree (= 7).
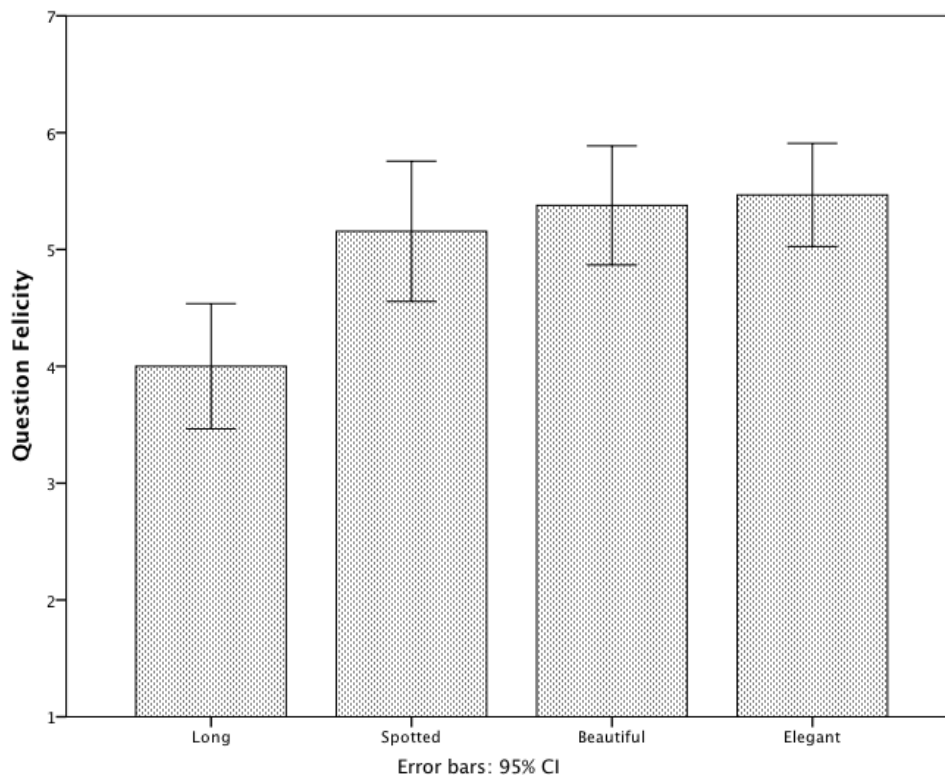

Figure 2: Results for the Question Felicity Study

The means for the adjectives tested are shown in **Figure 2** and as follows: relative ("long") $M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.784$; absolute ("spotted") $M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.999$; aesthetic$_{verdictive}$ ("beautiful") $M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.696$; and aesthetic$_{substantive}$ ("elegant") $M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.471$.

We first observed a difference across all adjectives tested. Repeated-measures one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant main effect of adjective on question felicity judgments: $F(3, 132) = 9.148$, $p < 0.001$. We then looked for differences between specific pairs of adjectives. As expected, a planned contrast revealed a difference between "long" and "spotted": $F(1, 44) = 9.652$, $p = 0.003$, effect size $r = 0.424$. More importantly, additional planned contrasts revealed differences of a similar magnitude between "long" and "beautiful", and between "long" and "elegant": $F(1, 44) = 27.123$, $p < 0.001$, effect size $r = 0.617$; and $F(1, 44) = 32.464$, $p < 0.001$, effect size $r = 0.652$. Simply put, on the question felicity test, aesthetic adjectives behave unlike relative adjectives.

3. Corpus Data on Compatibility with "for" Phrases

Still further evidence of a difference between aesthetic adjectives and relative adjectives comes from the fact that aesthetic adjectives, while felicitous with explicit mention of a comparison class via a "for a(n) N" phrase, as in the following examples, in fact virtually never appear with such phrases.[7]

> (4) (a) Anyone who calls someone "beautiful for an
>   older woman" does not get my love.
>   (b) Elegant for a Best Western

There are no such examples of "for" phrases with "beautiful" in the 450-million-word Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2008), and only 4 in the 1.9-billion-word Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE; Davies 2013). There are none in either corpus for "elegant".

Interestingly, both of the examples in (4) suggest that the adjective would not apply under ordinary expectations. In other words, someone who is described as beautiful for an older woman is so called presumably because the unqualified adjective would not apply; and in the case of (4b) one naturally infers that the author of the post would not consider the Best Western in question to count as elegant by some more commonly used standard.

Note that relative adjectives do not behave the same in these aspects. For example, occurrences of e.g. "tall," "short," "big," and "long" with such "for" phrases are easily findable in COCA and GloWbE. This contrast indicates that even if we might have some general idea of what counts as "tall" or "long" for a particular kind of individual (for example, we might be inclined to accept that 2 meters is tall for a person) when we look at subkinds of those individuals (e.g. 15 year old males, or people who grew up during the Spanish Civil War), those standards are highly susceptible to variation because height distribution varies considerably between subclasses, and therefore explicit mention of the comparison class of interest is necessary.

Moreover, the form with the "for" phrase does not consistently yield the implication that the unmodified adjective does not apply to the individual in question: (5a), from COCA, does not suggest that (5b) holds

> (5) (a) It rides on a 104-inch wheelbase – long for a
>   small car…
>   (b) The wheelbase is not long.

To sum up, the corpus data on aesthetic adjectives in combination with "for" phrases suggest that they behave unlike relative adjectives.

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[7] (4a) is from http://web.archive.org/save/https://twitter.com/charabbott/status/309378554217521152 and (4b) is from http://web.archive.org/save/http://www.tripadvisor.com.sg/ShowUserReviews-g31393-d226761-r118515504-BEST_WESTERN_PREMIER_Grand_Canyon_Squire_Inn-Tusayan_Arizona.html.

4. Additional Diagnostics for the Relative/Absolute Distinction

4.1. Compatibility with "Very"

Kennedy and McNally (2005) claim that "very" is restricted to combining with relative adjectives (6a). If it modifies an absolute adjective, the result is either infelicitous (6b) or the adjective is reinterpreted as relative, with a standard based on a comparison class. (6c), for example, describes the baby as generally alert, rather than in a state of a high degree of wakefulness, for which the phrase "wide awake" would be used.

(6)   (a)   a very long movie
        (b)   # a very closed door
        (c)   a very awake baby

Kennedy and McNally argue that this selectiveness is due to the fact that "very" influences the comparison class that the adjective uses to determine its standard, restricting that class to individuals to which the adjective truthfully applies in the context, following proposals in Wheeler (1972) and Klein (1980). If an adjective does not use a contextually-determined comparison class to determine its standard, as is the case, by hypothesis, with absolute gradable adjectives, "very" will not be able to exert its intended semantic effect and will thus not combine felicitously with the adjective.

Now consider the following examples of aesthetic adjectives in combination with "very".

(7)   (a)   a very beautiful performance
        (b)   a very elegant sculpture

The examples in (7) seem as natural as (6a). On this diagnostic, aesthetic adjectives behave like relative adjectives.

4.2. Comparative Form to Positive Form Entailment

Kennedy and McNally (2005) also observe that absolute and relative adjectives differ in their entailment patterns. Absolute adjectives whose standard is a lower endpoint on the relevant scale typically license entailments from the comparative form to the positive form for their subject argument, because to have any degree of the property in question entails that the property will truthfully apply, and to have more of a property than some other individual entails having a non-zero degree of that property. For example, (8a) entails (8b).

(8)   (a)   This disc is more spotted than that disc.
        (b)   This disc is spotted.

Absolute adjectives whose standard is the upper endpoint on the relevant scale license entailments from the comparative form to the negation of the positive form for the entity in the *than* clause. This is so because to have a non-maximal amount of the property entails that the adjective will not truthfully apply, and thus if X manifests the property to a higher degree than Y, the degree to which Y manifests the property cannot be maximal. For example, (9a) entails (9b).

(9)   (a)   This door is more closed than that door.
       (b)   That door is not closed.

In contrast, relative adjectives typically do not license entailments of either sort. For example, (10a) entails neither (10b) nor (10c).

(10)   (a)   This man is taller than that man.
       (b)   This man is tall.
       (c)   That man is not tall.

This shows that the standard for relative adjectives falls somewhere between the minimum and maximum degrees to which the property they describe can be manifest: in such a situation, we have no way of knowing *a priori* for two individuals that manifest a non-zero degree of such a property whether one, both, or neither falls above the standard.

Aesthetic adjectives, like relative adjectives, typically do not license such entailments.[8] There is no entailment from the (a) examples to the (b) or (c) examples in either (11) or (12).

(11)   (a)   This disc is more beautiful than that disc.
       (b)   This disc is beautiful.
       (c)   That disc is not beautiful.

(12)   (a)   This man is more elegant than that man.
       (b)   This man is elegant.
       (c)   That man is not elegant.

This shows that the standard for aesthetic adjectives cannot be simply the manifestation of a non-zero degree of the aesthetic property, nor does an aesthetic adjective truthfully apply only if a maximal degree of the property in question is held (if, indeed, it even makes sense to say that one can be maximally beautiful or elegant). On this diagnostic, aesthetic adjectives behave like relative adjectives.

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[8] This test is less reliable when it comes to negatively-valenced adjectives, possibly due to pragmatic factors. In general, negatively-valenced adjectives license the entailment from the comparative form to the positive form, irrespective of their context-sensitivity (Bogal-Allbritten 2011, though see Bierwisch 1989 for an earlier discussion that underscores the complexity of the data). For this reason, we focus on positively-valenced aesthetic adjectives here.

4.3. Compatibility with "Almost"

The general consensus in the literature is that relative adjectives generally sound odd when modified by "almost", whereas absolute adjectives generally do not (cf. Rotstein and Winter 2004 and references cited there).

>   (13)   (a)   The room is almost empty.
>   (b)   # The room is almost big.

For example, in the absence of context, (13a) sounds relatively natural but (13b) sounds less so.

However, it is also generally agreed that there are exceptions to this generalization. Rotstein and Winter (2004: 280) propose the following two conditions on the acceptability of "almost" with adjectives. First, the interval *almost A* is located on the scale below the standard value of *A*. Second, the standard value of *A* is its default value (if there is any) or else is recoverable from the context. When Rotstein and Winter say "default value", they are referring to adjectives with minimum or maximum standards; by "recoverable from context" they mean that a precise value for the standard is contextually available. In the latter such cases, "almost" *can* combine with a relative adjective. For example, in a context where it is known and accepted that 2 meters counts as tall, if we know that Sam's height is 1.9 meters, then we can assert that he is almost tall.[9]

Aesthetic adjectives, such as those in (14) sound markedly more natural with "almost" out of context than do examples such as (13b):

>   (14)   (a)   The cemetery was almost beautiful.
>   (b)   The rooms were clean and almost elegant.

On this diagnostic, aesthetic adjectives behave unlike relative adjectives.

5. Discussion

Although there might be a range of alternative explanations for the results of each diagnostic described above, we can have a unified and elegant account of the puzzling data presented therein by distinguishing two features that have been associated with relative adjectives. As we noted in §1, relative adjectives are typically defined as those gradable adjectives that are interpreted relative to a contextually-determined comparison class. Note that there are two components to this definition of relative adjectives: (a) the standard for these gradable adjectives is relativized to a *comparison class*, and (b) that comparison class is *contextually-determined*. We think

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[9] Sometimes this phenomenon is characterized as "coercion" of the adjective (e.g. Burnett 2012). Whether this is an appropriate characterization or not, we note that the co-occurrence of relative adjectives with "almost" is not infrequent. A brief inspection of COCA reveals more than two dozen examples of "almost" with adjectives such as "giddy", "angry", "obsessive", "sweet", "quaint", "happy" and various others that are not obvious candidates for absolute adjectives. "Beautiful" occurs 21 times with "almost", and "elegant" occurs 14 times with "almost".

that the puzzling behavior of aesthetic adjectives shows that these two features should be teased apart.

Aesthetic adjectives behave more like relative adjectives than like absolute adjectives on diagnostics that signal interpretation with respect to a comparison class. Aesthetic adjectives are compatible with "very" (§4.1) because it is possible to use "very" to restrict the comparison class to those individuals to which an adjective truthfully applies in a specific context. Aesthetic adjectives lack entailments from the comparative to positive form (§4.2) because their standards of application are not minimum or maximum values on a scale.

However, aesthetic adjectives behave less like relative adjectives on diagnostics that signal appeal to not just any comparison class, but rather to a comparison class that is not contingent on the immediate situational context. First, recall the question felicity test (§2): it makes sense to simply ask "Is this beautiful?" with little or no prior context because the comparison classes for aesthetic adjectives are not as a rule contextually-determined. Second, this fact also explains why aesthetic adjectives typically do not occur with "for" phrases (§3): typically such phrases are used to explicitly give a comparison class where the context offers none, but typically aesthetic adjectives already come with comparison classes that do not vary from situation to situation; rather, they seem to vary primarily according to the types of entities they apply to. Third, aesthetic adjectives' compatibility with "almost" (§4.3) indicates that, even out of context, aesthetic adjectives have recoverable standards of application; this can only be if those standards are specified by comparison classes that are not determined by the situational context.

To conclude, while a comparison class is essential for the evaluation of aesthetic adjectives, the default salience of the choice of class and the uniformity with which arbitrary subsets of the class members manifest a range of degrees of the property in question together effectively render aesthetic adjectives less context dependent, all else being equal.[10] Aesthetic adjectives can therefore be said to be "relative" in a broad sense of the term—they have standards that are established in relation to a comparison class—but not so in a narrow sense of the term—they do not have standards that are obviously context-dependent.

In this short paper, we have focused on "beautiful" and "elegant" for the diagnostics we have discussed. Note that these adjectives contain an evaluative component. We have set aside here adjectives that are commonly used in critical discourse but appear to be purely descriptive, such as style terms (e.g. "cubist" and "brutalist"). It remains to be explored whether other evaluative aesthetic adjectives exhibit the same linguistic properties as "beautiful" and "elegant"; the reader is invited to test other aesthetic adjectives using the diagnostics we have presented.

We also hope that the more nuanced characterization of gradable adjectives we have developed can shed light on the puzzling behavior that has been observed in other classes of gradable adjectives, such as predicates of personal taste, moral

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[10] We stress the all-else-being-equal clause here because we do not want to exclude the possibility that there can be other sources of context-dependence that do not involve a comparison class.

adjectives, and color terms.[11] For example, Hansen and Chemla (manuscript) have found that color terms behave similarly to aesthetic adjectives on another diagnostic, the presupposition assessment task (Syrett *et al.* 2006, 2010; cf. Liao and Meskin in press). It remains to be explored whether color terms and these other classes of gradable adjectives pattern in a similarly unstable fashion across a full range of diagnostics.

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[11] McNally and Stojanovic (in press) argue that aesthetic adjectives are distinct from predicates of personal taste (e.g. "fun" and "tasty"), which have been much more widely discussed.

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