Gradable adjectives can be classified into absolute and relative adjectives. In scale structure theory (e.g., Kennedy and McNally, 2005) absolute adjectives (e.g., clean) are associated with scales which have endpoints, whereas relative adjectives (e.g., tall) are associated with open-ended scales. Toledo and Sassoon (2011) argue that this scale structure based classification fails to account for the context sensitivity of absolute adjectives in certain cases, and propose another factor which affects the distribution of gradable adjectives. They propose a distinction based on the type of entities making up the comparison class of an adjective (van Rooij, 2011) which can be seen as parallel to the stage-individual level distinction for verbs (Carlson, 1977). The comparison class of stage level adjectives consists of different temporal stages of the same entity, so a shirt is judged as dirty relative to how dirty that shirt is or can be at different times. The comparison class of individual level adjectives on the other hand, varies by context, and consists of different entities at the same stage in time, so for a girl to be judged as tall she might be compared to other girls her age, or in her class.

In order to examine the relevance of this distinction to the classification of adjectives, a corpus study was conducted using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies, 2008-). The list of adjectives used in this study was compiled by Sassoon (2011), chosen based on common examples in the literature, and classified into absolute and relative adjectives based on established inference tests known to be sensitive to standard type (Kennedy and McNally, 2005; Rotstein and Winter, 2004; Kennedy, 2007). I conducted two searches, one for the adjectives in conjunction with modifiers considered to be markers of the absolute status of an adjective, completely and slightly, and a second in conjunction with temporal modifiers often and rarely, hypothesized to be indicators of stage-level adjectives. The measure used for the first search was the more frequent of the two for each adjective, Max(slightly,completely) (henceforth Max(s,c)), since this study is not concerned with the distinctions within absolute adjectives\(^1\). These results were filtered manually to exclude irrelevant cases.

It was shown that Max(s,c) is significantly higher for absolute than for relative adjectives \((z = 3.89, p = .0001)\), indicating that this is a good measure of absoluteness, and can then be used as such when being compared to the frequency of the temporal modifiers. The temporal modifier rarely \((p < .05)\) also occurred significantly more with absolute than with relative adjectives. Temporal uses of often did not occur significantly more often with absolute than with relative adjectives \((p_1 = 0.077, p_2 = 0.15)\). There was also a significant correlation between Max(s,c) and rarely A \((r_s = 0.4, p_2 = 0.029)\) and a weak correlation between Max(s,c) and often \((r_s = 0.303, p_1 = 0.052, p_2 = 0.104)\). This shows that the temporal modifiers pattern with absoluteness markers. This study complements results of an acceptability study reported in Sassoon (2011), showing higher acceptability ratings of rarely with absolute than with relative adjectives \((z = 12.62, p < .001)\). Taken together, these results indicate that the temporal properties of the comparison class are a factor in determining whether an adjective is absolute or relative.

\(^1\)Each measure used was normalized by dividing the frequency of co-occurrence of the modifier with the adjective by the total number of appearances of the adjective in the corpus.
References


