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## Polarity and standards of comparison: The interpretation of absolute adjectives in the *not very* construction

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There is a growing literature indicating that truth-conditional and connotative meanings are much more intertwined than standardly assumed in Semantics and Pragmatics (e.g., Nouwen, 2021; Beltrama, 2021). The interpretation of negated adjectives presents an exciting challenge to the Semantics/Pragmatics-Interface as grammatical and connotative or social aspects go hand in hand in the use and interpretation of such expressions (e.g., Mazzarella & Gotzner, 2021). The current paper focuses on antonymic pairs involving so-called absolute adjectives and how they are interpreted in the *not very* construction. For example, an utterance like *Joe's suit is not very clean* may implicate that 'Joe's suit is dirty'. Such a pragmatic inference has been referred to as negative strengthening and assumed to be socially motivated (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Horn, 1989). As we will show here, modified absolute adjectives (*not very clean*) can perform a similar pragmatic function, especially if they are evaluatively positive. In two experimental studies, we found that evaluativity and scale structure jointly modulate negative strengthening with positive (E+) and maximum standard adjectives (e.g., *clean*) being more likely to be strengthened than negative (E-) and minimum standard ones (e.g., *dirty*) in the *not very* construction. We interpret these findings as evidence that speakers may jeopardize informativity to arrive at a more positive message, extending the Polyanne Principle (Boucher & Osgood, 1969) to complex expressions.

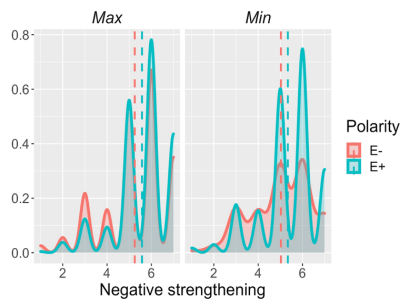


Figure 1: Mean degree of negative strengthening by Polarity (A) and Polarity/Adj. type (B)