
On the underspecification of measurement

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As seen in (1)-(5), the interpretation of natural language degree expressions can be ambiguous or underspecified in various ways. *Large* in (1) is underspecified for dimension (e.g. area, population size). *Dry* in (2) holds dimension fixed but is underspecified for scale structure (Kennedy&McNally 2005). *Few* in (3) exhibits a cardinal/proportional ambiguity that has been attributed to underspecification of measurement (Bale&Schwarz 2020). The comparatives in (4) allow faultless disagreement between speakers, suggesting that the corresponding measures depend on a judge or on the resolution of multidimensionality (Solt 2018). Finally, the contrasts in (5) have been used to show that even cardinality can be measured at different levels, with certain quantifiers sensitive to the difference (Solt 2016).

- (1) London is larger than New York. **dimensional**
- (2) a. The towel is ?very / completely dry. **scale structural**
b. My skin is very / ?completely dry.
- (3) Few students attended the party. **cardinal/proportional**
- (4) a. The Picasso is more beautiful than the Miró. **judge-related**
b. Moe is healthier than Curly. **multidimensional**
- (5) a. Most / 61% of our students are female. **measurement level**
b. Most/?61% of pastel colors have a calming effect.

I argue that all of these patterns derive from the same basic source: the measure functions μ encoded in natural language are inherently underspecified, determining at most a dimension of measurement rather than a particular scale. I discuss consequences of this view, as well as questions it raises, particularly relating to how such underspecification is constrained.

References: • Bale, A. & B. Schwarz (2020): Proportional readings of *many* and *few*. In: *L&P* 43, 673–699. • Kennedy, C. & L. McNally (2005): Scale Structure, Modification and the Semantics of Gradable Predicates. In: *Language* 81, 345–381. • Solt, S. (2016): On Measurement and Quantification. In: *Language* 92, 65–100. • Solt, S. (2018): Multidimensionality, Subjectivity and Scales. In: *The Semantics of Vagueness, Gradability and Scale Structure*, 59–91.