

A Prior-Uncertainty Model for gradable adjectives

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(joint work with Zhuoye Zhao)

Gradable adjectives (adjectives which can form comparative and superlative constructions, and be modified by intensifiers such as *very*) can be classified into two categories. Relative adjectives, such as *tall*, operate on a scale with no clear endpoints, tend to be vague, and their meaning depends heavily on a comparison class (*tall for a skyscraper* vs. *tall for a 5-year-old*). Absolute adjectives, such as *rainy* or *full*, have clear endpoints (no rain, completely full), do not seem to be vague, and are much less context dependent. A few models have been proposed to account for these properties (Lassiter&Goodman 2015, Qing&Franke 2014), with some remarkable empirical predictions for the use of intensifiers (Bennett&Goodman 2018). However, when compared with richer data sets, all models face some critical issues with absolute adjectives, and suffer some conceptual issues as well. In this talk, I will review the conceptual and empirical shortcomings of previous models and present a new model which takes uncertainty about the priors as the source of vagueness. As we will see, addressing conceptual issues with previous models allows for very accurate empirical predictions without increasing the number of parameters.