

High degree modifiers and adjectives: Evidence from French and Greek*

Evangelia Vlachou
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
evlachou@frl.uoa.gr

Περίληψη

Η παρούσα μελέτη εξετάζει τη συνδυαστικότητα των τροποποιητών υψηλού βαθμού (*High Degree Modifiers-HDMs*) ‘*beaucoup*’ και ‘*très*’ της γαλλικής και ‘πολύ’ της ελληνικής με διαβαθμίσιμα επίθετα (*gradable adjectives*) όπως ‘ψηλός’ και ‘άρρωστος’. Βασιζόμενοι σε δεδομένα της υπάρχουσας βιβλιογραφίας, δείχνουμε ότι, αντίθετα από ό,τι υποστηρίζεται παραδοσιακά για τον τροποποιητή ‘*beaucoup*’, όλοι οι παραπάνω τροποποιητές συνδυάζονται με επίθετα υπό προϋποθέσεις. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, προτείνουμε ότι ο ‘*beaucoup*’ είναι ένας γεγονοτικός τροποποιητής υψηλού βαθμού (*eventive HDM*), ο ‘*très*’ είναι ένας καταστατικός τροποποιητής υψηλού βαθμού (*stative HDM*) ενώ ο ‘πολύ’ δεν είναι ευαίσθητος σε αυτή τη διαφοροποίηση.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: τροποποιητής υψηλού βαθμού, *beaucoup*, *très*, πολύ, γεγονοτικό επίθετο, καταστατικό επίθετο

1 Introduction

It has been argued that acquiring quantifying expressions is a challenging and demanding process (see Katsos 2012 for an overview of the literature and relevant predictions). Gradable adjectives such as *grand* in French and *ψηλός* in Greek are quantifying in the sense that they signal an individual’s quantity of tallness.

- (1) Paul est grand.
Ο Πέτρος είναι ψηλός.
‘Paul is tall’

Degree Modifiers (DMs) such as *très* and *πολύ* below indicate the degree to which a quantifying expression applies (see Kennedy (1999) and Kennedy and McNally (2008) in particular) and, for the purpose of the present study, the degree to which a gradable adjective applies. The sentence in (2), for instance, is true if and only if Paul is tall at a degree that excels the average of tallness in the situation at hand.

- (2) Paul est très grand.
Ο Πέτρος είναι πολύ ψηλός.
‘Paul is tall.’

* Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the International Conference of Greek Linguistics 14 organized by the University of Patras and during my research visits at the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics and the Laboratoire Structures Formelles du Langage at the University of Paris 8, in the fall of 2019. I am here grateful to all these audiences and especially to Claire Beyssade, Francis Corblin, Rea Delveroudi and Henriëtte de Swart for their fruitful comments. I am also grateful to the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens for having sponsored these research visits.

Let us call DMs such as *très* and *πολύ*, that express a high degree of a subject's property, High DMs (HDMs).

French possesses also another HDM, *beaucoup*, which, according to grammars of French as second language (see Grégoire and Thiévenaz 1995, *inter alia*), does not modify adjectives, contrary to *très*.

- (3) *Paul est beaucoup grand.
'Paul is very tall.'

The following is one of the many data that demonstrate the difficulty in the acquisition of *beaucoup* by learners of French as second language. Instead of using *très* with the gradable adjective *grand*, a student at the French Department of the University of Athens used *beaucoup*.

- (4) a. * Le secteur de la sémantique est beaucoup grand.
b. Le secteur de la sémantique est très grand.
'Semantics sector is very extensive.'

In view of the data above the question is raised what it is exactly that makes the acquisition of *beaucoup* so difficult for learners of French as second language. Although the acquisition of HDMs is not the object of the present study, we need to understand the exact property that distinguishes *beaucoup* from *très*.

The answer to this question becomes even more urgent in view of data as in (2) in which it is shown that the Greek counterpart of *beaucoup*, *πολύ*, is also grammatical with adjectives like *ψηλός* (=tall).

Moreover, one is definitely puzzled by the existence in the literature of examples like (5) in which it is shown that *beaucoup* is not difficult with all gradable adjectives, across the board: it combines with the adjective *malade* (= sick), for instance.

- (5) beaucoup malade
'very sick' (from Doetjes 2008)

The data above raise the following research question: Why do the high degree modifiers *beaucoup*, *très* and *πολύ* behave differently when combined with adjectives? To answer this question, we need to answer first the following two questions: what is the *behavior* of HDMs with adjectives? What is the *role* of HDMs when combined with adjectives? To answer these questions, the paper proceeds as follows. The following section provides a short overview of the main points and relevant data of the literature on the HDMs that we examine here. Section 3 analyzes the relevant data and proposes that, when combined with adjectives *beaucoup* and *très* signal different types thereof. More precisely, *beaucoup* combines only with eventive adjectives while *très* combines only with stative adjectives. *Πολύ* is insensitive to this difference.

2 Background knowledge¹

Let us begin this literature review with Doetjes (2007). She analyzes *beaucoup* as a frequency quantifier. In this use, its meaning is comparable to that of the frequency adverb *souvent* (=often) in French. The common reading available in the following data is *there are many events of Sylvie's going to the movies*. However, *beaucoup* has also the reading *Sylvie has spent a lot of time in the movies*. This reading is absent in the case of *souvent*.

- (6) Sylvie va beaucoup au cinéma.
'Sylvie goes to the movies a lot.'
- (7) Sylvie va souvent au cinéma.
'Sylvie goes often to the movies.'

Doetjes argues that *beaucoup* is a degree expression. Its degree interpretation is clearer in cases in which the non-iterative interpretation is on demand:

- (8) L'année dernière il a plu souvent mais il n'a pas plu beaucoup.
'Last year, it rained often but not a lot.'
- \ (slightly different from Doetjes 2007)

Doetjes proposes that *souvent* is a quantifier over times, else, a frequency quantifier, whereas *beaucoup* is a high degree expression. Its iterative meaning is connected not to *beaucoup* itself but to the predicate. When we have the reading of *a lot of time*, the predicate shifts to a mass interpretation. The sentence does not necessarily refer to a high number of cinema visits but can describe a large amount of time spent in the cinema watching movies. The verb *pleuvoir* shifts from a mass to a count interpretation. *Beaucoup* never introduces iteration. The source of iteration is always the plural interpretation of the predicate.

In Doetjes (2008) the first systematic cross-item account of French DMs is provided. It is proposed that DMs form a continuum, depending on their compatibility with various grammatical categories. This continuum is formulated in terms of adjacency. At its very beginning we have the category "adjectives". Then comes the category "gradable verbs", then the category "eventive verbs", then the category "mass nouns", and finally the category "plural nouns".

According to this continuum, if a DM is compatible with adjectives such as *grand*, it may be compatible with gradable verbs such as *apprécier* "appreciate", a category adjacent to the category of adjectives on the continuum. Besides some exceptional cases with nouns used predicatively (for instance, *c'est une ville très sportive* "this village is very sportive"), it may not be compatible with nouns because this category is not adjacent to the category of adjectives. *Très* is a good example for this as demonstrated in (9). In the same continuum, *beaucoup* is correctly predicted to

¹ Here we present the most relevant literature on the combinability of the HDMs under consideration. For an overview of the literature of other (high) degree modifiers in French and Greek the reader may consult Delveroudi and Vassilaki (1999), Ευθυμίου (2003), Gabriilidou and Efthimiou (2003), Ralli (2003), Γαβριηλίδου (2013), Vlachou (2014), Corblin and Vlachou (2016), Efthymiou (2016), Giannakidou and Gavriilidou (2016), Βλάχου και Φραντζή (2017). Also, *πολύ* is not studied here as prefix. For this use, the reader may consult Delveroudi and Vassilaki (1999) and Gabriilidou and Efthimiou (2003). For a recent detailed overview of the literature on these and other HDMs in French and Greek, the reader may also consult Vlachou (in press).

combine with gradable verbs, eventive verbs, nouns, but not with adjectives such as *grand* (10).

- (9) Un homme très grand/ce président a été très apprécié/*j'ai bu très eau.
'A very tall man/this president has been much appreciated/I drank much water.'
- (10) Beaucoup aimer, beaucoup de soupe, de livres, *beaucoup grand.
'Love very much, much soup, many books, many books.'

As for *πολύ*, Giannakidou and Gavriilidou (2016) study its combinability with adjectives as in (2), repeated below, stative verbs and past participles.

- (2) Paul est très grand.
Ο Πέτρος είναι πολύ ψηλός.
'Paul is tall.'
- (11) πολύ αγαπημένος
'very loved'

Vlachou (in press) attempts a first semantic typology of French and Greek HDMs and proposes that their distribution evolves around two meaning parameters that characterize the predicate they combine with: a) quantity dimension (that is, the difference between small and big quantity) and b) norm (that is, the difference between normative versus non-normative predicates).

Both parameters seem to play a crucial role in the distribution of HDMs. For instance, *πολύ* and *très* are problematic below because the quantity in question (the distance between 1.81 and 1.82) is very small.

- (12) George measures 1.81 and John 1.82.
*Ο Γιώργος είναι πολύ ψηλός σε σχέση με το Γιάννη.
'George is very tall compared to John.'
- (13) George measures 1.81 and John 1.82.
*Georges est très grand par rapport à Jean.
'George is very tall compared to John.'

Turning to the difference between normative and non-normative predicates, Vlachou argues that a predicate like *tall* is normative while a predicate like *eat* is not. Suppose that we are dealing with a sick person who had stopped eating for days. Today is a new day and we see that he accepts eating a small quantity of food. We see for instance, at our surprise, that he eats a spoon of purée and then he stops again. In this special context, the following sentence seems perfectly fine: *he ate*. Such a predicate is not normative in nature because it does not compare the relevant property to a norm. *Tall*, on the other hand, is normative. As such it induces comparison to a certain type of norm. That is, in order to characterize a person as tall we always compare her to an average of tallness. Based on this difference, Vlachou (in press) predicts that *beaucoup* is grammatical in sentences as in (14) because the predicate is not normative. *Beaucoup* is out in (3) because the predicate (*tall*) is normative.

(14) Tu manges beaucoup.
'You eat a lot.'

(3) *Paul est beaucoup grand.
'Paul is very tall.'

Très likes normative predicates. For this reason, it is good with adjectives like *grand* (2). *Πολύ* is insensitive to the difference between normative and non-normative predicates, as shown in (2) and (15).

(2) Paul est très grand.
Ο Πέτρος είναι πολύ ψηλός.
'Paul is tall.'

(15) Τρώς πολύ.
'You eat a lot.'

Going back to our original question regarding the different combinability patterns of HDMs with adjectives, the proposals above are not very helpful. More precisely, although Doetjes' approach predicts the combinability of *très* with a gradable adjective like *grand* (2) and the impossibility of *beaucoup* with the same adjective (3), it does not explain why *beaucoup* combines with an adjective like *malade*, exemplified in (5) repeated below.

(5) beaucoup malade
'very sick' (from Doetjes 2008)

Moreover, the two parameters proposed by Vlachou (in press) are not helpful either. As we explained above, in order to characterize one as *tall* we need to be sure that one's height is well above an average of tallness. The same is true for an adjective like *sick*. For instance, when someone is sick, he has fever above a certain degree of fever. Still, *beaucoup* combines with such a predicate as shown in (5). Also, Giannakidou and Gavriilidou's approach does not help us explain why *πολύ* has a larger distribution in comparison to *beaucoup* and possibly other HDMs of the languages of the world.

The data presented in Section 1 raised the following research question: Why do the high degree modifiers *beaucoup*, *très* and *πολύ* behave differently when combined with adjectives? To answer this question, we needed to answer first the following question: what is the behavior of HDMs with adjectives? It has been shown that all three of them combine with adjectives. In the following section we attempt to answer the question of the role of HDMs when combined with adjectives.

3 The relevant distinction

Here it is argued that *beaucoup* and *très* are sensitive to the difference between eventive and stative adjectives. While *πολύ* appears with both types of adjectives, *très* appears only with stative adjectives and *beaucoup* only with eventive ones.

3.1 Stage level versus individual level predicates

In the literature on HDMs it has sometimes been argued that languages possess HDMs that signal a different interpretation of adjectives they combine with. Take for instance the Dutch couple of HDMs *erg* (=much) and *veel* (=many) below.

(16) Jan is veel afwezig.
'Jan is often absent.' (from Broekhuis and den Dikken 2012)

(17) Jan is erg afwezig.
'Jan is often absent-minded.' (from Broekhuis and den Dikken 2012)

As explained by Broekhuis and den Dikken (2012), *afwezig* means physically absent in (16). The same adjective means "absent-minded" when combined with *erg* (17). According to the analysis in Broekhuis and den Dikken (2012), the difference between *veel* and *erg* above reflects a difference between a stage level and an individual level reading.

A general characteristic that distinguishes stage level from individual level predicates is that only the first ones can appear in small clauses-complements of perception verbs:

(18) Yesterday, I saw John drunk.

(19) ?? Yesterday, I saw John intelligent/tall.

In view of the Dutch data above, one wonders whether Broekhuis and den Dikken's way of explaining the difference between *erg* and *veel* can serve as a possible path to explain the different combinability patterns of *beaucoup*, *très* and *πολύ* with adjectives.

The general idea would be to argue that an adjective that combines both with *beaucoup* as well as with *très* is an adjective that can get individual level and stage level readings. Indeed, one can argue that when *malade* combines with *très* it gets an individual level reading while when it combines with *beaucoup* it gets a stage level reading. If this were correct, then (20) would mean that John is a sick person (he suffers either from a chronic disease or from mental health problems from his childhood) while (21) would mean that John is very often sick.

(20) Jean est très malade.
'John is very sick.'

(21) Jean est beaucoup malade.
'John is very sick.'

Moreover, this way of approaching would explain the incompatibility of *beaucoup* with *know* and *equal* according to Obenauer (1983, 1984, 1994):

(22) *Cet élève sait beaucoup la réponse.
'* This student knows a lot the answer.'

(23) *Son jeu égale beaucoup celui de Lendl.

‘* His play equals a lot that of Lendl.’

In the same vein of approach, *πολύ* would appear insensitive to the difference between individual level and stage level predicates:

- (24) Ο Γιώργος είναι πολύ μεθυσμένος/έξυπνος.
‘George is very drunk/intelligent.’

In the following section, it is argued that this way of approaching the HDMs under examination would not be on the right track.

3.2 *Stative versus eventive predicates*

Individual-levelness and stage-levelness cannot be all there is to the story for HDMs. If they were, *très* would occur only with individual level predicates. However, the data below show that both *beaucoup* as well as *très* can occur with temporally bound predicates:

- (25) Ce journal a été très lu (par les jeunes).
‘This newspaper has been read a lot by young people.’ (from Doetjes 2008)
- (26) Ce journal a été beaucoup lu.
‘This newspaper has been read a lot.’ (from Doetjes 2008)
- (27) Pendant mon adolescence, ce journal a été très lu (par les jeunes).
‘During my adolescence, this newspaper has been read a lot by young people.’
- (28) Pendant mon adolescence, ce journal a été beaucoup lu.
‘During my adolescence, this newspaper has been read a lot.’

In these cases, the predicate is not individual level in the sense that it describes an event that concerns a specific temporal period during which a newspaper has been read.

Stage level predicates describe properties of stages while individual level predicates describe inherent properties of individuals. If the relevant distinction between *très* and *beaucoup* concerned the difference between individual level and stage level predicates, *très* would not be grammatical above. The same is true for data as in (9) repeated in a slightly different way as 9’ below:

- (9’) Ce président a été très/beaucoup apprécié.
‘This president has been much/ very often appreciated.’

The relevant distinction that seems to lurk behind the distribution of *beaucoup* and *très* is that they signal the difference between stative and eventive predicates. In the same vein of reasoning, Doetjes argues that in (25) *ce journal* refers to the type of journal, which is found in a specific state, that of being read by many people. On the contrary, in (26) reference is made to a specific journal-object that can lay down on a table just before us, for instance.

Idem, the Dutch couple *veel* and *erg* is sensitive to the same difference. Doetjes (2008) proposes that *veel* in (29) below modifies the global amount of the event of being sick. It seems that *veel* quantifies over the amount of events of sickness. *Erg*, on the other hand, modifies the total state of sickness (30).

(29) Jan is veel ziek.
'Jan is often sick.'

(30) Jan is erg ziek.
'Jan is seriously sick.'

Turning back to the couple *beaucoup/très* and its combinability with adjectives, *beaucoup* is grammatical with an adjective if it can get an eventive interpretation. *Sick* is such an adjective as just explained regarding its Dutch counterpart, *ziek*, just above. For this reason, (21) repeated below is grammatical:

(21) Jean est beaucoup malade.
'John is very sick.'

It cannot combine with an adjective like *grand* (3) because it can never get an eventive interpretation:

(3) *Paul est beaucoup grand.
'Paul is very tall.'

Très is compatible only with adjectives that can get a stative interpretation. This prediction is borne out in (2') below and (20):

(2') Paul est très grand.
'Paul is tall.'

(20) Jean est très malade.
'John is very sick.'

As for *πολύ*, it does not appear to be sensitive to the difference between stative and eventive adjectives, as shown by the data below:

(2'') Ο Πέτρος είναι πολύ ψηλός.
'Paul is very tall.'

(31) Ο Πέτρος είναι πολύ άρρωστος.
'Paul is very sick.'

4 Conclusion

Traditionally, the French high degree modifier *beaucoup* is thought to be problematic with adjectives. The present paper sheds light to interesting data that have been around in the literature and shows that this conception is wrong. This is done through its comparison to other HDMs such as *très* in French and *πολύ* in Greek.

The paper started out with the question why the high degree modifiers *beaucoup* and *très* in French and *πολύ* in Greek behave differently when combined with adjectives. This question gave birth to the following two research questions: 1) What is the behavior of *beaucoup*, *très* and *πολύ* with different types of adjectives? 2) What is the role of *beaucoup*, *très* and *πολύ* when combined with adjectives? It has been shown that, invariably, these HDMs combine with adjectives. It has been argued that they differ in that they combine with different types of adjectives. *Beaucoup* is an eventive degree modifier while *très* a stative degree modifier. *Πολύ* is not sensitive to the difference between eventive and stative adjectives.

References

- Βλάχου, Ευαγγελία, και Κατερίνα Φραντζή. 2017. “Η χρήση των ποσοδεικτών λίγολιγάκι σε κείμενα πολιτικού λόγου.” In *Selected Papers of the 12th International Conference on Greek Linguistics*, edited by A. Alexiadou et al. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 1201–1212.
- Broekhuis, Hans, and Marcel den Dikken. 2012. *The Syntax of Dutch. Nouns and Noun Phrases*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Γαβριηλίδου, Ζωή. 2013. *Όψεις επίτασης στα ελληνικά*. Θεσσαλονίκη: Κυριακίδης.
- Corblin, Francis, and Evangelia Vlachou. 2016. “Une échelle de mesure pour la précision relative des quantifieurs: étude comparative français-grec.” In *Travaux de linguistique* 72, 49–71.
- Delveroudi, Rhéa, and Sophie Vassilaki. 1999. “Préfixes d’intensité en grec moderne: *para*, *kata*-, *poly*- et *olo*-.” In *Les opérations de détermination : Quantification/Qualification*, edited by Alain Deschamps and Jacqueline Guillemin-Flescher. Paris : Ophrys, 149–167.
- Doetjes, Jenny. 2008. “Adjectives and degree modification.” In *Adjectives and Adverbs: Syntax, Semantics and Discourse*, edited by Chris Kennedy and Louise McNally. Oxford University Press.
- Doetjes, Jenny. 2007. “Adverbs and quantification. Degrees versus frequency.” *Lingua* 117, 4.
- Ευθυμίου, Αγγελική. 2003. “Προθήματα ή α’ συνθετικά που δηλώνουν επίταση στη νέα ελληνική.” Στο *Μελέτες για την ελληνική γλώσσα*. Θεσσαλονίκη: Αφοί Κυριακίδη 23(II), 519–528.
- Efthymiou, Angeliki. 2016. “On the Polysemy of the Modern Greek Prefix *para*-.” In *Word- Formation across Languages*, edited by L. Körtvélyessy, P. Stekauer, S. Valera. Cambridge Scholars Publisher.
- Gabriilidou, Zoi, and Angeliki Efthimiou. 2003. “Το πρόθημα *πολύ*- στη νέα ελληνική.” In *Selected Papers on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics* 15, 152–165.
- Gavriilidou, Zoi, and Anastasia Giannakidou. 2016. “Degree modification and manner adverbs: Greek: *poli* ‘very’ vs. *kala* ‘well’.” In *Selected Papers of the 21st International Symposium on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (ISTAL 21)*, 93–104.
- Grégoire, Maia, and Odile Thiévenaz. 1995. *Grammaire progressive du français*. CLE international.
- Katsos, Napoleon et al. 2012. “The acquisition of quantification across languages: Some predictions.” In *Proceedings of the 26th Boston University Conference on*

- Language Development*, edited by Alia K. Biller, Esther Y. Chung, and Amelia Kimball, 258-268. Cascadilla Press, Somerville, MA.
- Kennedy, Christ. 1999. *Projecting the adjective: the syntax and semantics of gradability and comparison*. Garland Press, New York.
- Kennedy, Chris, and Louise Mc Nally. 2008. *Adjectives and Adverbs: Syntax, Semantics and Discourse*. Oxford University Press.
- Obenauer, Hans-Georg. 1983. "Une quantification non-canonique : la « quantification à distance »." *Langue française* 58, 66–88.
- Obenauer, Hans-Georg. 1984. "On the identification of empty categories.", *The Linguistic Review* 4, 153–202.
- Obenauer, Hans-Georg. 1984. *Aspects de la syntaxe A-barre. Effets d'intervention et mouvement des quantifieurs*. Unpubl. PhD diss. University of Paris 8.
- Ralli, Angeliki. 2003. "Preverbs in Greek: the case of ksana, kse-, para-." In *Asymmetry in Grammar: Morphology, Phonology and Language Acquisition*, edited by Anna Maria Di Sciullo. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 37–65.
- Vlachou, Evangelia. 2014. "The quantifiers in a crosslinguistic perspective." Paper presented at the meeting Déterminants et inférence (16-17 December 2014, Université de Sorbonne-Paris 4).
- Vlachou, Evangelia. In press. "High degree modifiers in French and Greek." *Studies in Greek linguistics* 40.