

Degree modification and indefinite noun phrases in Spanish

Modificación de grado y sintagmas nominales indefinidos en español

Carolina Oggiani*
Romina Trebisacce[†]

Abstract

In this squib we address indefinite noun phrases when modified by the degree expression *muy* ('very') in Spanish. We focus on Río de la Plata Spanish, although this phenomenon seems not to be restricted to this variety of Spanish only. Assuming that degree modifiers must combine with gradable predicates, the puzzle we aim to solve here is what kind of modification is at play, if any, when an indefinite noun phrase admits *muy* ('very') as an adnominal modifier. More specifically, we will explore the combination of *muy* ('very') with non-gradable indefinite phrases. The hypothesis we will pursue here is that the degree modifier scopes over the entire determiner phrase. In particular, *muy* ('very') measures the proximity of an entity (typically the subject of the sentence) to the prototype denoted by the indefinite noun phrase, boosting some of its salient properties and assigning them to the subject.

Keywords: adnominal modifiers; indefinites; degree expressions.

Resumen

En este *squib* estudiamos el comportamiento de frases nominales indefinidas precedidas por el modificador de grado *muy*. Nos centramos en la variedad del español del Río de la Plata, aunque este fenómeno parece no estar restringido únicamente a esta variedad de español. Si asumimos que los modificadores de grado deben combinarse con predicados graduables, entonces debemos responder cómo opera la modificación de grado (si es que opera) cuando una expresión indefinida se combina con *muy*. Específicamente, aquí nos detenemos en la combinación de *muy* con frases nominales indefinidas no graduables. La hipótesis que defendemos es que el modificador de grado tiene alcance sobre todo el sintagma determinante. En particular, proponemos que *muy* mide la proximidad de una entidad (típicamente el sujeto de la oración) al prototipo denotado por la frase nominal indefinida, asignando algunas de sus propiedades sobresalientes a la entidad denotada por el sujeto de la oración.

Palabras claves: modificadores adnominales; indefinidos; expresiones de grado.

*Universidad de la República, Udelar. E-mail: oggiani.carolina@gmail.com. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7104-4738>.

[†]Universidad de Buenos Aires, UBA. E-mail: rtrebisacce@gmail.com. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3587-3234>.

1 Introduction

Gradability is defined as a grammatical mechanism that measures properties. Gradability applies to gradable predicates, being relative adjectives the typical grammatical categories that admit degree modification, due to their semantics. Then, a predicate is said to be gradable if and only if it allows different ordered values within a sequence, where some values are higher than others. This is exemplified in (1):

- (1) a. Juan es muy lindo.
 Juan is very handsome
 'Juan is very handsome.'
- b. Juan es muy alto.
 Juan is very tall
 'Juan is very tall.'

Simply put, the predicates *lindo* ('nice') and *alto* ('tall'), in (1a) and (1b) respectively, combine with the degree modifier *muy* ('very'), increasing the degree of the property that is applied to the subject of the sentence (Fábregas, 2020; Kennedy; McNally, 2005).

Additionally, the set of values to be selected from the scale must be deduced from a general standard. For example, based on a scale of values of handsomeness or tallness, (1) expresses that Juan possesses any of the properties to a high extent. That is, the values assigned to these properties are deduced from standard values, which are shared within a context. As such, Juan may be tall considering the regular height of an adult, but not that of a basketball player (Fábregas, 2020).

Even though gradability has been typically linked to gradable predicates, it has been shown for some time now that it is a transcategorial phenomenon (Doetjes, 1997; Kennedy; McNally, 2005; Morzycki, 2009; de Vries 2018, Masià, 2019; among others). This being said, Rioplatense Spanish displays a productive adnominal degree modification paradigm (Kornfeld, 2010; Kornfeld; Kuguel, 2013; Resnik, 2013; Oggiani; Bértola, 2019; Sanchez-Mendes; Polakof, 2022; Avellana; Trebisacce; Ramos, 2024). In this squib, we will bring attention to the behavior of the degree modifier *muy* ('very') when interacting with indefinite noun phrases (NPs). The data, which was gathered from social media¹, provides a clear view on this phenomenon in colloquial Rioplatense Spanish. The examples illustrated in (2) show that the degree modifier *muy* ('very') selects non-gradable indefinite NPs.

- (2) a. Mi hermanito puede ser muy un adulto, pero
 my little.brother can be very an adult but
 'My little brother can be very much an adult but
- para mí siempre será ese niño.
 for me always will.be that kid
 to me he will always be that kid.'

¹The examples in this squib were taken from the social media X.

- b. Es muy un mal de heterosexuales no poder formar
 is very a problem of heterosexuals not be able form
 ‘It’s a very common problem for heterosexuals not to be able to form
 amistades después de la secundaria.
 friendships after of the highschool
 friendships after high school.’
- c. Esa película tiene muy una muy buena banda sonora
 that movie has very a really good soundtrack
 ‘That movie has a really, really good soundtrack.’
- d. Ella es muy una persona de ciencias, y yo soy más
 she is very a person of science and I am more
 ‘She’s very much a science person, and I’m more
 de sociales.
 of social sciences
 of a social sciences person.’

Based on this kind of data, the primary goal of this squib is to analyze two key phenomena concerning the construction under scrutiny: (i) the licensing restrictions that confine this structure to specific classes of nouns, rejecting others, such as example (3); and (ii) the mechanisms by which the degree modifier operates over these NPs.

- (3) a. *Tiene muy una capacidad.
 she-has very a capacity
- b. #Tiene muy una habilidad para hacer amigos.
 she-has very an ability to make friends

We will adopt de Vries’ (2018) hypothesis, which holds that the gradability of nouns is related to their inherent scale structure (open or closed scale), a distinction also observed in the adjectival domain. Specifically, non-gradable nouns (e.g., *adulto* (‘adult’), *banda* (‘band’), *persona* (‘person’)) are associated with prototypes (commonly understood as abstract embodiments of a concept) and have a closed scale — or maximum standard — in their lexical semantics. On the other hand, gradable nouns are not necessarily associated with a prototype and possess an open scale.

However, this widely accepted view raises a crucial empirical puzzle regarding modification. The central puzzle this squib addresses is the following: if degree modifiers are assumed to select a specific value along a scale, then, *prima facie*, open-scale nouns should be the preferred candidates for combination with a degree modifier. Crucially, however, the data presented in examples (2) indicate the opposite pattern. Our main claim is that the degree expression *muy* (‘very’) scopes over the prototype, referred to by the indefinite NP, thereby boosting the salient properties of a prototypical individual to a high degree. This correctly predicts a greater affinity for non-gradable nouns over their gradable counterparts.²

²We are well aware that this phenomenon may be worth studying under the view of the expressive dimension of meaning (Potts 2005, among others). We will set these concerns aside for now, due to space limitations.

This squib is organized as follows. Section 2 assesses the distribution of *muy* ('very') when combined with indefinite noun phrases. Section 3 presents an overview of the main approaches on gradability of the nominal domain, focusing on de Vries' (2018) proposal. In this section we apply some of the tests used in the literature to Spanish and set our hypothesis. Section 4 provides an explanation on the combination of *muy* with non-gradable indefinite NPs; namely, we argue that the degree modifier operates over a prototype. Section 5 concludes by showing that this data brings new evidence in favour of gradability as a transcategorial phenomenon.

2 A descriptive overview of degree modification and indefinite noun phrases

Colloquial Rioplatense Spanish provides systematic data in which indefinite noun phrases combine with the degree modifier *muy* ('very'). Even though this structure is highly productive in predicate positions (4), it can also appear in argument position (5).

- (4) a. Lemonade es muy una canción de publicidad de zapatillas.
 Leomande is very a song of commercial of shoes
 'Lemonade sounds very much like a shoe commercial song.'
- b. Ella es muy una persona de ciencias.
 she is very a person of science
 'She is very much a science person.'
- (5) a. Ayer vino muy una persona de ciencias.
 yesterday came very a person of science
 'Yesterday a person from the sciences came by.'
- b. Muy una cena nos merecemos.
 very a dinner we-DAT deserve
 'We deserve a very good dinner.'

In terms of modification, the indefinite NP is likely to be modified, although this seems not to be a prerequisite. As observed in (6), when modified, they are typically modified by a prepositional phrase or relational adjectives, which are argued to be kind level modifiers (McNally; Boleda, 2004).

- (6) Ella es muy una persona muy lógica / de ciencias.
 she is very a person very logical / of sciences
 'She is very much a logical person / science person.'

Without modification, their acceptability is (at least) doubtful:

- (7) a. #Ella es muy una persona.
 she is very a person
- b. #Lemonade es muy una canción.
 Lemonade is very a song

An additional property of this construction is that the degree modifier applies to the entire determiner phrase (DP). Our conjecture is based on the fact that there may also appear internal degree modifiers that grade the property within the DP itself. For example, in (8), an external *muy* ('very') modifies the nominal expression, but also the noun *mujer* ('woman') is internally modified by the same degree expression.

- (8) Es muy una mujer muy válida para los realities.
 is very a woman very capable for the reality
 'She's a very capable woman for reality TV.'

Regarding the type of nouns heading the indefinite NP, they can be concrete nouns (9a), abstract nouns (9b) and even eventive nouns (9c).

- (9) a. Es muy una casa antigua.
 is very an old house
 'It's very much an old house.'
- b. Sería muy una lástima que Chivas perdiera otra vez.
 it.would.be very a shame that Chivas lost again
 'It would be a real shame if Chivas lost again.'
- c. Lo otro fue muy una invasión muy diferente.
 The other was very an invasion very different
 'The other was a very different kind of invasion.'

However, certain gradable nouns seem to reject this construction, as seen in (10).

- (10) a. #Esa es muy una capacidad de aprendizaje.
 It is very a capacity of learning
 'It is very a learning capacity.'
- b. #Ella tiene muy una habilidad para llevarse bien con la gente.
 she has very an ability to get along with the people
 'She really has the ability to get along with people.'

In sum, this construction is reserved for the predicative position, although in some contexts it can appear in internal argument position as well. We have seen that they are modified by kind level modifiers and that they accept internal modification at the noun level, apart from the external modification over the entire DP. As for the nature of the nouns, *muy* combines with concrete and abstract nouns, but it seems to impose restrictions on certain gradable nouns. In order to address these licensing restrictions, in the following section we will go over the main proposals that have addressed gradability on the nominal domain.

3 The (non-)gradable nature of nouns

As mentioned in Section 1, gradability is argued to be a transcategorial phenomenon. Within the nominal domain, many authors have observed that nouns also differ in terms

of their capacity for degree modification. One of the first tests that differentiates the behavior of gradable and non-gradable nouns comes from exclamative constructions. When gradable nouns, such as *idiot* (11), appear with an exclamative phrase, they allow for an interpretation in which an inherent gradable property in the noun's lexical semantics is intensified (in this case, the property of idiocy). In contrast, with non-gradable nouns, such as *guy* (12), what is intensified is some implicit contextually inferred property.

- (11) What an idiot John is! gradable noun
 (12) What a guy John is! non-gradable noun

Some authors have argued that all nouns are gradable, with the main difference being the property they grade: either an inherent property (11) or an implicit external property inferred by context (12) (Bolinger, 1972; Constantinescu, 2011). Conversely, other proposals claim that only certain nouns are in fact gradable. For instance, Morzycki (2009) claims that gradable nouns are gradual because they have a single criterion along which they are assessed. For example, the NP *great idiot* is graded based on stupidity as the only criterion, whereas the NP *great chair*, which is non-gradable, has multiple potential criteria on which it can be graded, such as comfort, size, etc. More recently, de Vries (2018) also argues that only certain nouns are gradable. More specifically, she argues that the main difference between gradable and non-gradable nouns is rooted in the type of scale they are associated with. The author observes that, parallel to the adjectival domain (following McNally; Boleda, 2004), nouns can also have open or closed scales in their meanings. When they are associated with a prototype, they have a closed scale and that is why they can be modified by an endpoint modifier such as *almost*, as seen in (13). In turn, if they are not associated with a prototype, they have an open scale and thus they cannot be modified by *almost*, as indicated in (14).

- (13) That's almost a chair. closed-scale noun
 (14) #He's almost an idiot. open-scale noun

The difference between open and closed-scale nouns is observed when they combine with size adjectives. While open-scale nouns allow for the interpretation where the property denoted by the noun is graded by *huge* (15), with a closed-scale noun, *huge* can only be interpreted as denoting size (that is, it cannot grade the property of 'chairness') (de Vries, 2018) (16).

- (15) John is a huge idiot. open-scale noun
 (16) This is a huge chair. closed-scale noun

The differences observed in the literature also hold true for Spanish. When a gradable noun appears either in exclamative constructions (17a) or in relative adjectival constructions (17b), the property denoted by the noun is graded. Indeed, it is possible to paraphrase these structures by *¡cuánto N!* ('how much/how') (Avellana *et al.*, 2024), as seen in (17c).

(17) *Gradable nouns*

- a. ¡Qué calor!
 what hot
 How hot!
- b. ¡Manso calor!
 mild hot
 How hot!
- c. ¡Cuánto calor!
 how-much hot
 How hot!

Conversely, when non-gradable nouns combine with an exclamative (18a) or an elative (18b), either the *wh*-word or the grammaticalized elative adjective intensifies an implicit, contextually inferred property of the noun, as the paraphrase in (18c) shows. Crucially, *cuánto* ('how much/how') cannot combine with these nouns (18d), since there is no inherent lexical property to be graded.

(18) *Non-gradable nouns*

- a. ¡Qué casa!
 what house
 What a house!
- b. ¡Mansa casa!
 mild house
 What a house!
- c. ¡Muy buena/grande/linda casa!
 very nice/big/beautiful house
 'That's a really nice/ big/beautiful house!'
- d. #¡Cuánta casa!
 how house
 What a house!

Regarding the combination with the endpoint modifier *casi* ('almost') and size adjectives, such as *gran* ('big'), we obtain the same predicted behavior. First, *casi* ('almost') is licensed with closed-scale nouns (19), while it is not compatible with open-scale nouns (20).

(19) *Closed-scale nouns*

- a. Es casi una silla.
is almost a chair
'It's almost a chair.'
- b. Es casi una casa.
is almost a house
'It's almost a house.'

(20) *Open-scale nouns*

- a. #Es casi un idiota
is almost an idiot
'It's almost an idiot.'
- b. #Hace casi un calor
makes almost a hot
'It's almost hot.'

Second, when open-scale nouns combine with the size adjective *gran* ('big'), the property in question undergoes grading (21). However, with closed-scale nouns, the adjective does not grade the inherent property (e.g., the *chairness* or *houseness*), as shown in (22). In these cases, only a figurative or evaluative meaning (equivalent to 'great') is possible.

(21) *Open-scale nouns*

- a. Juan tiene un gran coraje.
Juan has a big courage
'He has great courage.'
- b. Hace un gran calor.
makes a big hot
'It is very hot.'

(22) *Closed-scale nouns*

- a. Esta es una gran silla.
this is a big chair
'This is a great chair.'
- b. Esta es una gran casa.
this is a big house
'This is a great house.'

Furthermore, note that in Spanish the size adjective *gran/grande* ('big') has two possible positions: prenominal (*gran*) and postnominal (*grande*). When postposed, which is the canonical position of adjectives in Spanish, it expresses a size meaning. Conversely, when preposed (*gran*), it adopts an evaluative meaning (equivalent to 'great'), as mentioned before. Importantly, with closed-scale nouns, size can be expressed when

the adjective appears in postnominal position (23). However, with open-scale nouns, expressing size postnominally is odd (24).

(23) *Closed-scale nouns*

a. Una casa grande.
a house big
'A big house.'

b. Una tormenta grande.
a storm big
'A big storm.'

(24) *Open-scale nouns*

a. #Un calor grande.
a hot big
'A big hot.'

b. #Una capacidad grande.
a capacity big
'A big capacity.'

Taking these tests into account, de Vries (2018) claims that only open-scale nouns are genuinely gradable. As a first approximation, we have observed a similar pattern in Spanish. In the next section, we will examine the distribution of *muy* ('very') with indefinite NPs, considering de Vries' (2018) hypothesis on the distinction between open and closed-scale nouns. If only open-scale nouns can be graded, we would expect them to combine more easily with *muy* ('very'). Interestingly, however, we find that it naturally combines with closed-scale nouns, as first illustrated in examples (1). In the following section, we will pursue the idea that, when combined with close-scale predicates, the degree modifier takes scope over the indefinite NP. Precisely, the modifier scopes over the prototype indefinite NP, boosting some salient properties of the prototype to a high degree.

4 Degree modification of close-scale nouns

Here we show that, contrary to initial expectation, the degree modifier *muy* ('very') combines readily with closed-scale nouns, which are inherently non-gradable. We claim that this is so because *muy* operates over a prototype, as argued in de Vries (2018) for English. Specifically, the degree modifier measures the proximity of an entity (namely the subject of the sentence) to the prototype denoted by the indefinite NP.

Thus, *muy* ('very') combines easily with nouns that are associated with prototypes, namely, closed-scale nouns (25); tending to reject open-scale nouns (26).

- (25) a. Es muy una casa de campo.
is very a house of country
'It's very much of a country house.'
- b. Lo otro fue muy una invasión muy diferente.
The other was very an invasion very different
'The other thing was a very different kind of invasion.'
- (26) a. #Esto es muy una suavidad.
that was very a softness
'It's very much of a softness.'
- b. #Tiene muy un coraje.
has very a courage
'He has great courage.'

Considering that the indefinite NP refers to a prototype, a paraphrase of this construction with sentences denoting prototypicality is possible (27). Note that in the first paraphrase (27a) *un x típico* ('a typical x'), the adjective *típico* ('typical') can occur either in pre or post-nominal position, like most adjectives in Spanish. The second paraphrase (27b), *lo que se dice un/a* ('what you would call') also highlights a prototypical meaning.

- (27) a. Es muy un adulto.
≈ Es un adulto típico / Es un típico adulto.
'He is a typical adult.'
- b. Es muy una persona de ciencias.
≈ Es lo que se dice una persona de ciencias.
'It's what you would call a science person.'

Conversely, and as expected, paraphrasing open-scale nouns with these sentences yields awkward constructions:

- (28) a. #Es muy una suavidad. / #Eso es una suavidad típica / típica suavidad.
'That is a softness typical / typical softness.'
- b. #Es muy una habilidad. / #Eso es lo que se dice una habilidad.
'That is what you would call an ability.'

Another piece of evidence suggesting prototypicality is adjectival modification, as already shown in (6). When close-scale nouns are targeted by *muy* ('very'), they tend to combine with predicates operating at the kind level. Therefore, individual level adjectives like *rubio* ('blond') and *lindo* ('handsome') result in anomalous constructions (29).

- (29) a. #Es muy un adulto rubio.
is very an adult blond
'He's very much of a blond adult.'
- b. #Es muy un adulto lindo.
is very an adult handsome
'He's very much of a handsome adult.'

Having established that *muy* selects nouns associated with a prototype, we propose a preliminary account of its semantic contribution. We claim that *muy* measures in a high degree the proximity of an entity (typically the subject of the sentence) to the prototype denoted by the indefinite NP, without entailing category membership. This observation is illustrated in the following examples.

Context: Ana's brother is 10 years old. When his mother has to work late, he makes dinner for his younger sister and himself. In this context, it is more appropriate for Ana to say (30) than (31).

(30) #Mi hermano es muy un adulto.
 my brother is very an adult
 'My brother is very much an adult.'

(31) #Mi hermano es un adulto.
 my brother is an adult
 'My brother is an adult.'

Then, given the context above, we show in (32) and (33) that the subject of the sentence is close to the prototype of an adult, but this does not entail that he is an adult. In fact, it is possible to combine such a sentence with an adversative, given that two different meanings are at play.

(32) Mi hermano es muy un adulto. \nRightarrow Mi hermano es un adulto.
 my brother is very an adult \nRightarrow my brother is an adult
 'My brother is very much an adult.'

(33) Mi hermano es muy un adulto, pero no es un adulto.
 my brother is very an adult but not is an adult
 'My brother is very much an adult but he is not an adult.'

In sum, in this section we have given some evidence in favour of *muy* ('very') scoping over the entire non gradable indefinite NP. In order to show that the degree modifier measures the proximity of a prototype denoted by the indefinite, we have proposed two tests, namely: we have provided two different paraphrases that address prototypicality and we have shown that they are best combined with kind level adjectives. Then, having shown that *muy* selects prototype-associated nouns, we have claimed that its semantic contribution is to measure the entity's high degree of closeness to the prototype, without entailing category membership, as evidenced by its compatibility with adversative clauses.

5 Final remarks

In this squib we analyzed the distribution and semantic contribution of the adnominal degree modifier *muy* ('very') when combining with indefinite NPs, a productive phenomenon observed in colloquial Rioplatense Spanish. The core puzzle arises from the fact that degree modifiers are standardly assumed to select gradable predicates, yet empirical data demonstrates that this construction is licensed by indefinite NPs headed by

non-gradable, closed-scale nouns, such as *adulto* ('adult') and *persona* ('person'). Crucially, the structure is often rejected by certain gradable, open-scale nouns like *capacidad* ('capacity') and *habilidad* ('ability').

To account for this unexpected pattern, we follow de Vries' (2018) hypothesis, which relates gradability of nouns to their association with prototypes. Our main claim is that the degree expression scopes over the entire DP, targeting the prototype, referred to by the indefinite NP. Semantically, *muy* ('very') measures the proximity of an entity (typically the subject) to this prototype, boosting its salient properties to a high degree.

In our view, this analysis correctly predicts the affinity for closed-scale nouns and it is supported by data showing that the construction can be paraphrased with prototypical expressions like *un x típico* ('a typical x'). Additionally, we showed that the modified sentence does not entail category membership, as evidenced by its compatibility with adversative clauses. In conclusion, this type of adnominal degree modification in Spanish provides a novel insight into the transcategorical nature of gradability.

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AUTHORS

Carolina Oggiani (Udelar)

Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Writing – Review & Editing

Romina Trebisacce (UBA)

Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Writing – Review & Editing

Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT):

https://contributorshipcollaboration.github.io/projects/translation/translations/pt_latn/

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