

Adnominal Modification with Proper Nouns in Spanish

Introduction As it has been well attested in the literature, the adverb *muy* ('very') in Spanish is restricted to modifying expressions that are both adjectives and gradable (RAE & ASALE, 2009, 20.4.1 20.4.3.a., 19.3.3b.). As seen in (1), the adverb combines with words like *big* and *tall*, which are canonical examples of gradable adjectives expressing an ordering in terms of size and height, respectively.

- (1) Juana es muy grande/ alta.
Juana is very big tall
'Juana is very big/ nice/ tall.'

Regarding the nominal domain, nouns are admittedly not the category that most lends itself to degree constructions¹. However, the data in (2) show that proper personal nouns in Spanish –in particular, Rioplatense Spanish–can indeed be modified by *muy* ('very') (Sánchez-Méndes & Polakof, 2022), but only when they appear in predicative position:

- (2) a. Tiene un estilo muy Lady Gaga.
has one style very Lady Gaga
b. Esa jugada de Lamine Yamal fue muy Messi.
that move of Lamine Yamal was very Messi

Goal. Assuming that proper nouns are rigid designators that lack descriptive meaning (Kripke 1980), and, thus, that they are inherently non-gradable predicates (Kennedy & McNally 2005), the aim of this presentation is to explore the meaning contribution and syntax of proper nouns when selected by this degree adverb.

Characterization. In the first part of this presentation we offer a descriptive analysis and show that proper nouns (which do not need to refer to famous individuals) can be modified by *muy* ('very'), expressing a truth-conditional content. As seen in (3a), *muy* ('very') can be replaced by other degree modifiers (3a), it cannot co-occur with more degree words (3b), and it is incompatible with wh-exclamatives (3c), these three facts suggesting that *muy* ('very') preserves its degree status as DegP.

- (3) a. El apartamento es bastante Ana.
the apartment is fairly Ana
b. *El apartamento es muy súper Ana.
the apartment is very super Ana
a. *Qué/Cuán muy Ana es el apartamento!
what how very Ana is the apartment

As for the meaning of the proper noun, it does not refer to the individual called Ana, but rather to one or more salient properties (which may vary from context to context) of the referent in question. Example (4) illustrates this in the continuation sentence.

- (4) Ese apartamento es muy Ana. Está pintado de blanco, el color preferido de Ana.

¹ In Rioplatense Spanish degree modifier *re*, similar to *muy* ('very'), can modify certain types of common nouns. See Kornfeld & Kuguel (2013) and also Saab (2024) for an overview.

that apartment is very Ana is painted of white the color favorite of Ana.
Intended interpretation: 'That apartment has a style typical of Ana. It's painted in white, her favorite color.'

In the second part of the presentation, I propose that *muy* ('very') triggers an expressive meaning. More precisely, it expresses an emotional attitude from the speaker towards the situation involving the referent denoted by the proper noun (as already argued in Sánchez-Méndez & Polakof (2022)). In order to prove this behavior, we rely in some of the tests commonly used in the literature to identify expressivity, such as at-issueness, projection, descriptive ineffability, and non-displaceability (Potts, 2005; Tonhauser, 2011; Gutzman, 2019). For example, being a not at-issue content, the expressive meaning in (5) cannot be asserted nor denied.

(5) A: Esa remera es muy Teodoro.
that t-shirt is very Teodoro

Intended interpretation: 'That t-shirt has a style typical/characteristic of Teodoro (an I feel excited about it)'.

B: # Es verdad. Me encanta que esa remera sea muy Teodoro.
is true pronoun love that that t-shirt is very Teodoro
'It's true. I love that t-shirt is typical of Teodoro'.

B: #No es verdad. No me gusta que esa remera sea muy Teodoro.
No is true no pronoun like that that t-shirt is very Teodoro
'It's true. I love that t-shirt is typical of Teodoro'.

Analysis. The formal analysis aims to capture the nature of *muy* ('very') as a mixed expressive (Sánchez-Méndez & Polakof 2022). From a semantic point of view, the adverb is a function that takes an entity, returns a set of ordered properties of that entity, and increases the degree of one of those properties, which may vary in context (Waksler, 2012). On the syntactic side, I follow Gutzmann & Turgay (2015) and Saab (2024) in that within the DP there is an additional adnominal degree phrase whose Deg is marked with an [+exp] feature as well as the D position. Assuming a classical view on proper nouns (Longobardi, 1994), I would like to suggest that given that DegP interferes between D and NP, the proper noun is unable to raise to D, thus staying in situ and preserving its property interpretation.

References

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