

# Review of: "Geach's "Good" and "Bad", Attributive After All"

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Thank you for sharing this manuscript! I almost know nothing about moral philosophy or ethics, so I can only leave some brief comments as a linguist.

Within formal semantics literature on natural language, "good" and "bad" are studied along with other gradable adjectives, e.g., tall, large, short, clever, intelligent, etc. Morphologically, English gradable adjectives can have comparative forms (e.g., better, taller, larger, more intelligent, etc.) and superlative forms (e.g., best, tallest, largest, most intelligent, etc.). Semantically, gradable adjectives can be used to form the following constructions:

- (1) degree questions: How tall is Mary?
- (2) measurement sentences (for some gradable adjectives): Mary is 6 feet tall. (cf. \*Mary is 6 feet short -- this is ungrammatical).
- (3) comparative sentences: Mary is taller than Sue.
- (4) equatives: Mary is as tall as Sue.
- (5) positive use (where a further degree modifier like "very" can be involved): Mary is (very/quite/really) tall.

Non-gradable adjectives like "atomic", "red", "dead" usually cannot have comparative forms (e.g., ??more atomic, ??redder, ??deader) or superlative forms (e.g., ??most atomic, ??reddest, ??deader), although it seems that we can sometimes coerce them into comparative or superlative forms to achieve some specific literature-like effects. Also non-gradable adjectives can hardly be used in the above constructions (e.g., \*How atomic is this bomb; \*This bomb is more atomic than / as atomic as that one; \*This bomb is really/very/quite atomic).

I think the research on gradable adjectives has yielded at least two insights that are relevant to this paper.

First, the interpretation of gradable adjectives (e.g., good, tall) requires a comparison class. For example, when we say "this mountain is tall" vs. "Mary is tall", we interpret the threshold of tallness in different ways: for "this mountain is tall", we compare the height of this mountain with the average height of mountains; for "Mary is tall", we compare Mary's height with the average height of women/basketball players/toddlers (depending on context). Thus, it's evident that as a gradable adjective, the interpretation of "good" and "bad" should also involve this kind of comparison class (see Bartsch & Vennemann 1972; Cresswell 1976; Kennedy 1999; Stechow 1984).

Thus, we can easily explain the interpretation of examples like "small flea" and "small male" in the current paper. Presumably, for "small flea", the comparison class is the set of fleas, while for "small male", the comparison class is

different.

Second, some gradable adjectives like "tall" involve a single dimension, but others like "clever" involve multiple dimensions. It's likely that between two people, A is more clever than B in solving mathematical problems, while B is more clever than A in playing politics. In other words, people can be clever in different ways. I think the same analysis works for "good" and "bad" as well. "Good" and "bad" should also be gradable adjectives that involve multiple dimensions. As pointed out in the current paper, whether something is "good" often depends on contextual information, e.g., the function or the purpose behind this thing. Many examples like these have been discussed in formal semantics literature (e.g., Larson's discussion on "Olga is a beautiful dancer", which has two readings: (i) Olga is beautiful; (ii) Olga dances beautifully, see <http://semlab5.sbs.sunysb.edu/~rlarson/lisa95.pdf>).

In addition to the above two insights (from the research on gradable adjectives), I think another issue in the formal semantics research might be relevant. Sometimes whether the use of an adjective contributes to select out an item from a set depends on whether we use this adjective in a restrictive vs. a non-restrictive way. For example, we usually have more than one classmates, so in "my sick classmate", the use of "sick" helps to pick out, from the set of my classmates, the unique classmate that is sick. However, in "my sick mother", the use of "sick" is non-restrictive, and in this case, "sick" does not reduce the set of "mother" (which is already a singleton set).

#### References:

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