

Re-conceptualizing scale boundaries: The case of Dutch *helemaal*

Abstract

Maximizers – adverbs denoting a maximum degree of a property (e.g. *completely*) – are often re-conceptualized as boosters denoting a high degree (cf. *very*). As a result, these degree adverbs come to modify unbounded adjectives which are not compatible with the idea of a maximum value. Although this kind of meaning change proved cross-linguistically robust, the exact mechanisms of this process have never been investigated. The present paper aims to shed more light onto semantic and contextual factors facilitating combinations of open-scale (unbounded) adjectives with closed-scale (bounded) adverbs by analyzing the distribution of the Dutch maximizer *helemaal* in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch. Following the boundedness hypothesis, we hypothesized that configurational harmony destroyed by combinations of the maximizer *helemaal* with unbounded adjectives can be restored by either imposing scale boundaries onto, by default, unbounded adjectival scales, or by re-conceptualizing the degree adverb as an unbounded modifier. Both predictions were confirmed by the data in this study. The findings suggest that there is no one-to-one relationship between semantic classes of adjectives and scalar structures associated with them. Rather, scalar meanings are a matter of dynamic construal constrained by semantic properties of adjectives and degree modifiers, as well as by context and world knowledge.

Keywords: boundedness hypothesis; degree modification; maximizers; boosters; semantic change

1. Introduction

The fact that most of the adverbs “that originally expressed completeness, have in the course of time come to mean merely a high degree of a quality” was already noticed by Stoffel (1901:1). The English booster *very*, for instance, was borrowed in Middle English from Old French *verai* ‘true, genuine, really’ (cf. Ger. *wahr*, Du. *waar*) and was originally used to denote a maximum degree of a property (Peters, 1994; Lorenz, 2002; Mendez-Naya, 2003). Similarly, the Dutch booster *heel* ‘very’ originally had a stronger maximizer meaning of ‘completely, wholly’. Sometimes the development proceeds further down the scale, from a high to a moderate degree of the property. This happened, for example, to the English adverbs *fairly* and *quite* (Nevalainen and Rissanen, 2002) and to the Russian degree modifiers *vpolne* ‘rather’ and *ves'ma* ‘fairly’ that originally functioned as maximizers and denoted completeness (Tribushinina, 2008b).

Whereas this tendency proved very robust cross-linguistically (Peters, 1994; Jakovleva, 1994:296; Lorenz, 2002; Nevalainen and Rissanen, 2002; Mendez-Naya, 2003; Xmelevskij 2003; Tribushinina, 2008b), very little is known about the precise mechanisms of and the driving force behind this semantic change. In order to investigate these issues, it is crucial to capture a transitional period when an adverb can have both interpretations – the original maximizer interpretation and the new booster sense of ‘very’. Since semantic change normally starts in spontaneous speech, the transitory stage should be studied on the basis of a large corpus of spoken language data. To the best of our knowledge, a transitory stage between a maximizer and a booster sense of degree adverbs has never been properly investigated. The study reported in this paper aims to do just this.

Present-day Dutch offers us a perfect opportunity to explore the mechanisms of meaning re-conceptualization from a maximizer to a booster. Several researchers have

noticed in passing that young speakers of Dutch sometimes use the maximizer *helemaal* ‘completely’ in unusual, sub-standard combinations such as *helemaal goed* ‘absolutely good’ and *helemaal mooi* ‘absolutely beautiful/fine’ (Hoeksema, 2008; Kamoen et al., 2009). In such cases, *helemaal* cannot denote a maximum degree of a property because the adjectives it modifies denote unbounded properties having no maximum boundary. Rather, in such combinations, *helemaal* denotes a high degree of a property and is close in meaning to the booster *heel* ‘very’. In this paper, we will target the distribution of *helemaal* with adjectives in a large corpus of present-day spoken Dutch.

There are different ways of exploring the mechanisms of semantic change from a maximizer to a booster. Diachronically, one could focus on the pragmatic mechanisms steering the process of re-conceptualization. From this perspective, it is plausible to assume that a semantic change from a maximizer to a booster is driven by the process of subjectification whereby “meanings become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition” (Traugott, 1989:35). More precisely, one may argue that booster-like use of *helemaal* originated in combinations with evaluative adjectives and only later extended to more objective, non-evaluative domains (cf. Athanasiadou, 2007, Tribushinina, 2008b). A study taking this stance would have to diachronically trace the emergence of booster-like instances of *helemaal* in combination with adjectives denoting subjective evaluation and adjectives denoting more objective properties. Although this research path is interesting and worth further exploration, it will not be the focus of the present investigation.

In this article, we will take a synchronic perspective and study semantic and contextual factors facilitating re-conceptualization of a maximizer into a booster. The following questions are central to this study: Why is *helemaal* interpreted as a maximizer in some contexts and as a booster in other contexts? Which semantic and contextual

factors reinforce a non-maximality sense of *helemaal*? We will argue that the *boundedness hypothesis* developed by Paradis (2001, 2008) offers a much-needed explanatory framework accounting for the process of re-semanticization in the domain of degree modification. By this view, dynamic conceptualizations in the degree domain are constrained by the need to preserve configurational harmony between an adjective and a degree modifier. The boundedness hypothesis can, therefore, predict in which cases *helemaal* will be interpreted as a maximizer and in which contexts it will be re-conceptualized as a booster. These predictions will be tested by tracing the distribution of *helemaal* in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch (2004).

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 presents a theoretical background of the study. Section 3 describes material and methodology. Results of the corpus study are reported in Section 4. Conclusions are summarized in Section 5.

2. Theoretical prerequisites

2.1. Types of adjectives and scalar structures

Semanticists traditionally distinguished between gradable adjectives, on the one hand, and non-gradable adjectives, on the other hand. Adjectives are considered gradable if they denote a property that can be present in an object to a greater or lesser degree. Gradability is manifested in participation in comparative and superlative constructions and the ability to take degree modifiers (Sapir, 1944; Lyons, 1977:271; Murphy, 2003:189). Therefore, adjectives such as *tall*, *healthy* and *dirty* are gradable, whereas adjectives like *pregnant*, *previous* and *wooden* are non-gradable.

Currently semantics witnesses resurgence of interest in gradable adjectives. The renewed interest was caused by a recent finding that not all gradable adjectives are the same. Gradable adjectives differ in terms of the scalar structures they evoke and, by

implication, in terms of the degree adverbs they combine with (Paradis, 2001; Rotstein and Winter, 2004; Kennedy and McNally, 2005; Kennedy, 2007). Two large groups of gradable adjectives were distinguished – relative adjectives and absolute adjectives. A major difference between the two groups is in the nature of a standard of comparison. The interpretation of relative adjectives involves a computation of a contextually relevant standard of comparison. For instance, what is *expensive* for a cup of coffee is not necessarily *expensive* for a vase. By contrast, absolute adjectives have context-independent standards. What is *empty* for a cup is also *empty* for a vase.

Absolute adjectives are further divided into maximum-standard adjectives and minimum-standard adjectives. The application of maximum-standard adjectives requires the attainment of a maximum degree of the relevant property. For instance, a cup can be called *empty* if there is absolutely nothing left in it. In some contexts, however, the maximum standard can be loosened so that a cup that is empty for 95% can also be dubbed *empty*. Maximum-standard adjectives are by definition compatible with maximizing adverbs (e.g. *completely full*, *absolutely empty*). A special subtype of maximum-standard adjectives are extreme adjectives such as *excellent*, *terrible* and *superb*, which express a superlative degree of a certain property and, therefore, profile the maximum endpoint of a scale (Paradis, 1997). Thus, extreme adjectives, like other maximum-standard adjectives, are by definition felicitous with maximizers (e.g. *absolutely excellent/terrible/superb*).

By contrast, for a minimum-standard adjective to apply, a referent must possess some minimum degree of a property. For example, the adjective *spotted* can be applied if an entity possesses, at least, a few spots. Therefore, minimum-standard adjectives are easily combined with diminishers (e.g. *a bit spotted*) and boosters (e.g. *very wet*). Un-

like maximum-standard adjectives, these adjectives are in principle incompatible with maximizers. However, combinations with maximizers become felicitous in two cases:

1. if an extension of an object is meant (e.g. *a completely dirty table* is a table that is dirty all over);
2. if the scale evoked by the adjectives is closed at both ends, viz. if a zero value of the property denoted by one adjective coincides with a maximum value of the property denoted by its antonym. For instance, if something is 100% visible, it is 0% invisible and, conversely, a 100% invisible object is 0% visible. The same scale structure is applicable to pairs such as *open : closed*, *dependent : independent* and *possible : impossible*.

Relative adjectives, in their turn, are claimed to evoke scales open at both ends. Therefore, combinations of relative adjectives with maximizing adverbs are usually infelicitous (e.g. *??completely expensive*, *??absolutely tall*). It must be mentioned that this property of relative adjectives holds for English and Dutch, but not necessarily for other languages. For instance, Russian relative adjectives were shown to evoke half-closed scales (Apresjan, 1974, 2004; Tribushinina, 2009).

In this study, we have supplemented the classification of gradable adjectives developed by Kennedy and McNally (2005) by an additional type – evaluative adjectives (Bierwisch, 1989). Evaluative adjectives share properties of relative and minimum-standard adjectives. Like relative terms, they have a contextually determined standard of comparison. For instance, what is clever for a 3-year-old child is not necessarily clever for an adult. Another similarity between evaluative and relative adjectives is that they evoke scales open at both ends. Therefore, combinations of evaluative adjectives with maximizers are by default infelicitous (e.g. *??completely smart*). A major difference between relative and evaluative adjectives is that the former evoke one scale, whereas

the latter evoke two different scales conjoined at their zero points (Cruse, 1976; Bierwisch, 1989; Croft and Cruse, 2004). Therefore, comparative forms of relative adjectives are impartial, and comparatives of evaluative adjectives are always committed to only one property; compare (1) and (2).

- (1) a. Tom is taller than Jane, but he is actually short.
b. Jane is shorter than Tom, but she is actually tall.
- (2) a. ??Tom is smarter than Jane, but he is actually dumb.
b. ??Jane is dumber than Tom, but she is actually smart.

In this respect evaluative adjectives are similar to minimum-standard absolute adjectives the application of which also presupposes a divergence from a zero point on a separate (sub)scale:

- (3) ??The T-shirt is dirtier than the blouse, but both of them are actually clean.

It should be mentioned that the term “evaluative” is somewhat misleading, since the class of evaluative adjectives is distinguished not on the basis of a connotational component, but on the basis of scale structure and patterns of degree modification (Bierwisch, 1989). However, in need of a better term, we will use the term “evaluative adjective” to refer to bi-scalar adjectives with a context-dependent standard of comparison. This term is also used in other publications on scalar structure (e.g. Rotstein and Winter, 2004; Syrett, 2007).

2.2. Boundedness hypothesis

Combinations of *helemaal* with open-scale adjectives are problematic for truth-conditional approaches postulating a one-to-one relationship between semantic types of adjectives and type of scales evoked by them (e.g. Bierwisch, 1989; Kennedy and McNally, 2005). By this view, “it is impossible for open-scale adjectives to have endpoint standards” (Kennedy & McNally, 2005:361). Counter to this prediction, open-scale adjectives in contemporary Dutch are often combined with the maximizer *helemaal*. To anticipate the discussion in Section 4, such combinations constitute almost a quarter of *helemaal*+ADJ combinations in the corpus, which is too much to be treated as pragmatically licensed “exceptions”. Furthermore, these combinations are also possible in cases where *helemaal* retains its maximizer semantics.

Therefore, we need a theory that is able to account not only for semantic properties of adjectives taken out of context, but also for the actual use of adjectives and degree modifiers in everyday communication. An approach to degree modification that, in our view, has the necessary explanatory power and flexibility is the boundedness hypothesis (Paradis, 2001, 2008; Paradis and Willners, 2006). This hypothesis assumes that meaning cannot be equated with entities or relations in some real or possible world. Rather meaning is understood as *conceptualization*, in the sense that meanings correspond to concepts representing entities or relations through the prism of human mind (Langacker, 1987, 1990). Meanings are not fixed; rather they involve dynamic construal and conventionalization (Croft and Cruse, 2004; Paradis, 2005; Janssen, 2007; Verhagen, 2007).

As far as degree modification is concerned, the boundedness hypothesis posits that there must be configurational harmony between degree adverbs and the adjectives they modify. Therefore, bounded (closed-scale) adverbs denoting a maximum of a

property (e.g. *completely, absolutely*) and approximations to it (e.g. *almost, nearly*) should be compatible with adjectives denoting bounded properties (e.g. *full, dry*), but not with adjectives denoting unbounded properties (e.g. *tall, expensive*). Unbounded (open-scale) adjectives, in their turn, are compatible with unbounded degree modifiers – boosters (e.g. *very, awfully*), moderators (e.g. *rather, fairly*) and diminishers (e.g. *a bit, a little*) – denoting a range on a scale irrespective of any boundaries (e.g. *very tall, rather expensive, a bit cold*).

We hypothesize that in “atypical” combinations where the maximizer *helemaal* is combined with unbounded adjectives such as *goed* ‘good’ and *mooi* ‘beautiful/nice’ configurational harmony between an adjective and a degree adverb may be achieved in two possible ways:

- either an adjective gets a contextually valid bounded conceptualization through contextual modulation (Paradis, 1997);
- or a degree adverb is re-conceptualized as an unbounded modifier, most likely as a booster.

These two predictions will be tested in the corpus study reported below.

3. Methodology

3.1. Material

The Corpus of Spoken Dutch (2004) is a large database of present-day Dutch spoken in the Netherlands and in Flanders (Belgium). The data were collected between 1998 and 2003. The corpus comprises about 9 million words, two thirds of which represent Netherlandic Dutch and one third Belgian Dutch. 52% of the corpus are transcripts of spontaneous conversations. Other components include lessons recorded in the classroom, interviews, simulated business negotiations, news-reports, ceremonial speeches,

lectures and read speech (for details see <http://lands.let.kun.nl/cgn/ehome.htm>). For this study, we used both annotated transcriptions and the corresponding audio-files (Version 2.0.1).

Searches were made by means of the COREX software. Table 1 shows the total number of tokens of *helemaal* and the proportion of *helemaal* tokens relative to the total number of word tokens in the (sub)corpus. It is evident that *helemaal* is more frequent in Netherlandic Dutch than in Belgian Dutch: $\chi^2(1) = 2045.4$, $p < 0.001$. However, the proportion of adjective-modifying uses of *helemaal* was exactly the same in Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch.

Table 1. Total frequencies in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch

	Netherlandic Dutch		Belgian Dutch		Total	
	N tokens	%	N tokens	%	N tokens	%
<i>Helemaal</i>	8,141	0.14%	1,370	0.04%	9,511	0.1%
<i>Helemaal</i> + ADJ	1,144	14%	199	14%	1,343	14%

The utterances in which *helemaal* was followed by an adjective were reviewed and all non-relevant uses were removed manually. Sentences (4)-(6) are examples of the removed instances. In all these cases, the word following *helemaal* was erroneously coded as an adjective, although it was an adverb as in (4), a noun as in (5) or a preposition as in (6).

- (4) En dan rij je zo ook naar achteren **helemaal heel** lang uh
and then ride you so too backwards completely very long uh
pad is dat.
path is that

‘And then you ride backwards like that. It is a completely very long path.’

(5) Je hebt **helemaal gelijk**.

you have completely right

‘You are totally right.’

(6) Die waait **helemaal voorbij** de goal...

that blows completely past the goal

‘It is blowing all the way past the goal.’

The procedure described above produced a subcorpus of 1,298 relevant occurrences. In 258 cases (20%), *helemaal* was preceded by a negative particle. These cases will be discussed separately in Section 4.3, because negation of *helemaal* has implications for its semantics and combinability with adjectives (Hoeksema, 2008).

3.2. Coding

The relevant instances were coded according to semantic types of adjectives taking *helemaal*. An adjective was coded as non-gradable if it denoted a property that cannot be thought of in terms of degrees (e.g. *previous*). Such adjectives cannot take degree modifiers and form degrees of comparison. In contrast, gradable adjectives denote properties associated with different degrees; they can be used in comparative/superlative constructions and take degree adverbs. Gradable adjectives were further subdivided into relative, evaluative, maximum-standard and minimum-standard terms using criteria developed by previous research (Rotstein and Winter, 2004; Kennedy and McNally, 2005).

A gradable adjective was coded as relative if it evoked an open scale consisting of three parts: a zone of the target adjective, a zone of its antonym and a neutral zone where neither of the antonymous terms applies (e.g. *tall* : *of medium height* : *short*). For adjectives of this type, the assertion of one term implies the negation of its antonym (*Rick is short.* => *Rick is not tall.*). However, the negation of one term does not entail the assertion of its antonym, because the value can also fall within a neutral zone (*Rick is not tall.* \nRightarrow *Rick is short*). Since relative adjectives are mono-scalar terms, their comparatives can operate over the whole scale (e.g. *Rick is taller than Jane.* \nRightarrow *Rick is tall.* *Jane is shorter than Rick.* \nRightarrow *Jane is short.*). Relative adjectives evoke scales open at both ends, which means that both members of an antonym pair ought to be unacceptable with approximators and maximizers. Since *helemaal* is currently undergoing a semantic change from a maximizer to a booster, we used compatibility with other maximizers (e.g. *volledig* ‘completely’, *volkomen* ‘completely’, *absoluut* ‘absolutely’) that have not been affected by a similar meaning change as a diagnostic of scalar structure.

Evaluative adjectives, like relative adjectives, evoke fully open scales and are infelicitous with approximators and maximizers. As explained in Section 2.1, a major difference between evaluative and relative adjectives is that the former are bi-scalar, whereas the latter are mono-scalar terms. Therefore, comparatives of evaluative adjectives are always committed and confined to one sub-scale only, cf. examples (1) and (2). Like relative adjectives, evaluative terms evoke a context-dependent standard of comparison.

Maximum-standard adjectives are normally applied when a degree of a property attains a maximum value. For example, a surface can be dubbed *dry* if it has a zero amount of moisture. Due to their maximum-bounded semantics, these adjectives are perfectly acceptable with maximizers and approximators, but can also be combined with

boosters and diminishers. The negation of a maximum-standard adjective entails the assertion of its antonym (e.g. *The table is dry.* => *The table is not wet.*). A combination of a maximum-standard adjective with *half* entails the negation of the adjective (e.g. *The plant is half dead.* => *The plant is not dead.*).

Minimum-standard adjectives, in contrast, can be used when an entity contains a non-zero degree of a property. For example, a table that is slightly wet can be legitimately called *wet*. Hence, these adjectives easily lend themselves to modification by diminishers. In combination with *half* minimum-standard adjectives, unlike maximum standard terms, entail the assertion of a property (e.g. *The table is half wet.* => *The table is wet.*). Comparatives of these adjectives are restricted to one subscale, as evidenced by example (3). Adjectives of this semantic type are infelicitous with approximators. Their compatibility with maximizers is contingent upon a scale structure associated with an adjective. Some minimum-standard adjectives, such as *nerveus* ‘nervous’, *raar* ‘strange’ and *vuil* ‘dirty’, are incompatible with the idea of a maximum value. These adjectives can, in principle, only be modified by maximizers when the extension of the described object is meant. Such adjectives are associated with half-closed scales, because their antonym is usually a maximum-standard term such as *rustig* ‘quiet’, *normaal* ‘normal’ and *schoon* ‘clean’. This is the most important difference between minimum-standard adjectives and evaluative adjectives, since in the latter case both antonyms evoke open subscales. Another type of minimum-standard adjectives are words such as *open* ‘open’ and *zichtbaar* ‘visible’, which denote properties compatible with an idea of a maximum value; the maximum value in this case coincides with the zero value of the property denoted by their antonym. Hence, scales triggered by such adjectives are closed at both ends. Since scalar structure has implications for compatibility of mini-

imum-standard adjectives with *helemaal*, adjectives of this type were additionally coded in terms of scale boundedness.

4. Results

In this section, we first report the results of the quantitative analyses of the distribution of *helemaal* with adjectives from different semantic types (Section 4.1). After that we turn to a deeper qualitative analysis of cases where *helemaal* is combined with adjectives from semantic groups that should, in principle, be incompatible with maximizers. Section 4.2 focuses on the affirmative instances of *helemaal* and Section 4.3 targets cases in which *helemaal* is preceded by a negation. Section 4.4 takes a closer look at the contexts where *helemaal* has got the new booster sense and discusses stylistic, geographical and demographical aspects involved in the semantic change of *helemaal*.

4.1. Quantitative analysis

4.1.1. Distribution of *helemaal* with adjectives

Table 2 shows the distribution of *helemaal* with adjectives belonging to different semantic types.

Table 2. Frequencies of *helemaal* by adjective type

	N	%
Maximum-standard adjectives	734	57%
Minimum-standard adjectives (closed scales)	227	17%
Minimum-standard adjectives (half-closed scales)	142	11%
Relative adjectives	94	7%
Evaluative adjectives	78	6%
Non-gradable adjectives	23	2%
Total: <i>helemaal</i> without negation	1,298	100

As explained in Sections 2.1 and 3.2, the maximizer *helemaal* ought to be compatible with bounded adjectives, i.e. maximum-standard adjectives and minimum-standard adjectives with closed scales (Kennedy and McNally, 2005). In line with this prediction, 74% of the relevant combinations are cases where *helemaal* modifies bounded adjectives. The remaining 26%, however, are inconsistent with the predictions made in Kennedy and McNally (2005). These exceptions are very likely to be, at least, partly related to the ongoing semantic change of *helemaal* from a maximizer to a booster. In Sections 4.2 and 4.3, we will explore whether this is indeed the case by taking a closer look at contexts in which *helemaal* modifies unbounded adjectives (relative, evaluative and minimum-standard adjectives with half-closed scales) and non-gradable adjectives. However, before turning to qualitative analyses it is necessary to relate the frequencies in Table 2 to overall frequencies of adjective types and to frequencies of other degree modifiers.

4.1.2. Overall frequencies of adjectives and adverbs

A reasonable explanation of the pattern of results reported in Table 2 is that *helemaal* (as a maximizer) is most likely to be combined with bounded adjectives whose semantics is compatible with the idea of a maximum. Notice, however, that this pattern might also bear upon the overall token frequencies of adjective classes. For example, if maximum-standard adjectives are the largest adjective class in spoken Dutch, then the high token frequencies of *helemaal* with bounded adjectives may be merely a reflection of the overall token frequencies of this adjective class. In order to rule out this explanation, we need to consider proportions of adjectives from different semantic groups.

One way to do this would be to code all adjectives in the corpus in terms of semantic classes, the way we did it for adjectives modified by *helemaal*. However, it is

obviously not feasible to manually code 563,614 adjectives in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch for semantic type. Therefore, to get an estimation of overall adjective frequencies we identified the total token frequencies of all adjectives that were attested in combination with *helemaal*. This analysis revealed that bounded adjectives (N=104,391) are less frequent than unbounded adjectives (N=145,673). This finding is fully consistent with the pattern of results reported in Tribushinina and Gillis (2010) for a smaller corpus of spoken (Belgian) Dutch. We may, therefore, exclude the possibility that the higher proportion of bounded adjectives modified by *helemaal* is related to higher overall token frequencies of bounded adjectives.

Another way to show that *helemaal* as a maximizer easily lends itself to combinations with bounded adjectives is to compare the distribution of *helemaal* with the distribution of other degree modifiers. In order to address this issue, we compared the frequencies of the adjectives modified by *helemaal* with the frequencies of the same adjectives used in combination with the booster *heel* ‘very’ and the diminisher *een beetje* ‘a bit’. Figure 1 shows that proportion of modifications by *helemaal*, *heel* and *een beetje* relative to the total number of adjective tokens from the six semantic classes.

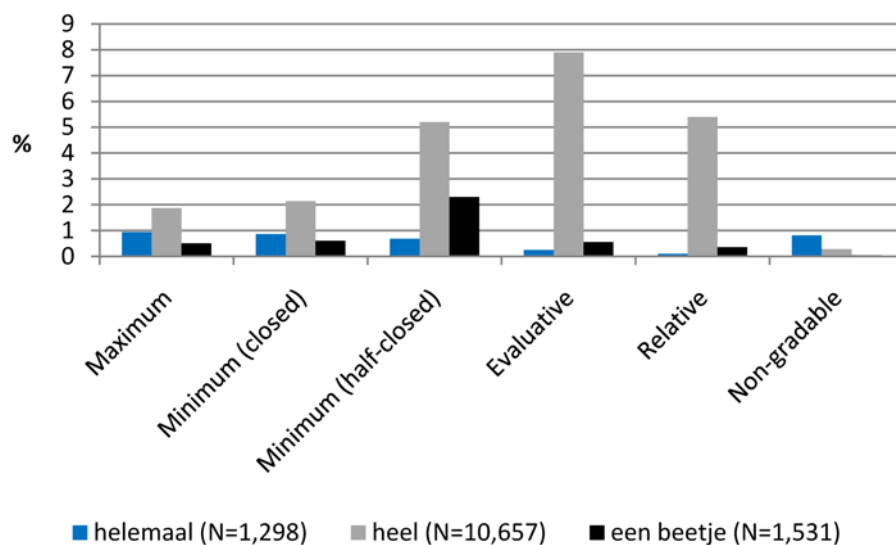


Figure 1. Proportion of modifications by *helemaal*, *heel* and *een beetje* by adjective type

A two-way contingency table – semantic type of adjectives (maximum-standard, minimum-standard with closed scales, minimum-standard with half-closed scales, relative, evaluative, non-gradable); degree adverb (*helemaal*, *heel*, *een beetje*) – was subjected to a hierarchical loglinear analysis with a backward elimination procedure. The analysis revealed a significant adjective type by degree adverb interaction: $\chi^2(10) = 2680.6$, $p < 0.001$. Thus, adjectives from different semantic types reveal different preferences in terms of degree modifiers.

A posthoc chi-square test showed that relative frequencies of *helemaal* differ per adjective type: $\chi^2(5) = 716.4$, $p < 0.001$. More specifically, *helemaal* is more likely to be combined with non-gradable adjectives ($z = 2.2$) and with bounded adjectives, including maximum-standard adjectives ($z = 16.7$) and minimum-standard with closed ($z = 8.0$) and half-closed scales ($z = 3.4$), than with unbounded relative ($z = -17.7$) and evaluative adjectives ($z = -6.6$).

Just as *helemaal*, the degree adverb *heel* ‘very’ is not equally distributed over adjective types ($\chi^2(5) = 2940.0$, $p < 0.001$), but its distribution reveals a reversed pattern. Combinations of *heel* with maximum-standard adjectives ($z = -31.9$), minimum-standard adjectives with closed scales ($z = -16.4$) and non-gradable adjectives ($z = -10.2$) are under-represented in the corpus, whereas modifications of relative ($z = 17.4$), evaluative ($z = 32.8$) and minimum standard adjectives with half-bounded scales ($z = 6.8$) are clearly over-represented.

The distribution of the diminisher *een beetje* ‘a bit’ is also contingent on the semantic type of adjectives: $\chi^2(5) = 1145$, $p < 0.001$. The diminisher is significantly more frequent in combination with unbounded minimum-standard adjectives ($z = 31.8$) than

with maximum-standard ($z = -3.6$), relative ($z = -10$) and non-gradable adjectives ($z = -3.9$). The observed frequencies of *een beetje* with bounded minimum-standard adjectives and evaluative adjectives were not significantly different from the expected frequencies ($z_1 = -0.3$, $z_2 = -1.4$).

To summarize, the main purpose of the comparisons undertaken in this section was to rule out the possibility that the higher frequencies of *helemaal* modifying bounded adjectives as compared to *helemaal* modifying unbounded adjectives are caused by overall token frequencies of bounded adjectives and/or higher probability of bounded adjectives to be modified by degree adverbs. The results clearly rule out these possibilities by showing that the larger proportion of *helemaal* uses in the bounded domain is not related to overall adjective or adverb frequencies. Adjectives of different semantic classes clearly have different preferences for degree adverbs. Minimum-standard adjectives (with half-closed scales) are more likely than adjectives from the other categories to be modified by the diminisher *een beetje*. Unbounded adjectives are more frequently modified by the booster *heel* than non-gradable and bounded adjectives, whereas bounded adjectives are more likely to be combined with *helemaal* than unbounded terms.

4.2. Qualitative analysis of *helemaal* without negation

4.2.1. Gradable unbounded adjectives

In this section, we will analyze combinations of affirmative *helemaal* with unbounded adjectives, i.e. adjectives associated with (partly) open scales, including relative, evaluative and minimum-standard adjectives. According to Kennedy and McNally (2005:365), maximizers become felicitous with adjectives denoting open or half-closed scales if “the extension of the adjective’s argument provides the basis for building the closed scale”.

In other words, the whole extension of the entity or of its active zone (Langacker, 1984) is taken as a maximum reference point. Therefore, this reading is only possible with bounded referents, but not with unbounded arguments; witness example (7) from Kennedy and McNally (2005:366). Sentence (7b) can be paraphrased as ‘All of the baby’s face is hot’. In contrast, (7a) does not contain an individualized bounded referent; therefore, extension-based application of the maximizer is impossible in this case.

- (7) a. ??Outside it’s completely hot.
 b. The baby’s face is completely hot.

In line with the claim made by Kennedy and McNally (2005), *helemaal* often combines with unbounded adjectives when a contextually relevant maximum value is mapped onto the extension of an entity. Example (8) illustrates this for the minimum-standard adjective *bezweet* ‘sweaty’, (9) for the evaluative adjective *hip* ‘hip’ and (10) for the relative adjective *lang* ‘long’.

- (8) Ja 'k had gaan volleyballen hè dus 'k was **helemaal bezweet**
 yes I had gone play.volleyball INT so I was completely sweaty
 geweest.
 been
 ‘Yeah I played volleyball right, so I was all sweaty.’

- (9) Oh goed zo jullie zijn allebei uh **helemaal hip**.
 oh good so you are both uh completely hip
 ‘Oh wonderful, you are both hip from head to toe.’

(10) Eigenlijk is 't misschien wel veel mooier om ze direct voor
actually is it perhaps rather much prettier CONJ them directly for
het raam te hangen in plaats van **helemaal lang** van boven naar
the window to hang in place of completely long from above to
beneden.

below

‘Actually it will probably be nicer to only cover the window instead of hanging
them [=curtains] in full length from above to below.’

However, the corpus data show that extension-based interpretations are not restricted to individuated objects and are also possible with more abstract referents. For example, (11) suggests that the speaker and her friends were enthusiastic about all facets of their travel plans. The maximizing interpretation of *helemaal* is in this case emphasized by a stronger accentuation of the first syllable.

(11) Volgens mij hadden we toen ons reisplan. En toen waren we
following me had we then our travel.plan and then were we
HELeemaal enthousiast en toen maakte zij echt zo'n opmerking
completely enthusiastic and then made she really such.a comment
van uhm oh moeten jullie jezelf leren kennen of zo.

from uh oh must you yourself learn know or so

‘I think we had our travel plan then. And we were totally enthusiastic and then she
made this comment a sort of uh oh you should get to know yourself or so.’

Paradis (1997:79) notices that maximizers are sometimes used with unbounded adjectives when “the focus is not on the typical scalarity of the adjective, but on the contextually modulated interpretation in which completeness is in focus”. This prediction is also consistent with the data in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch. Our analysis revealed 22 contexts in which combinations of unbounded adjectives with *helemaal* denoted a contextually determined maximum degree of the property. For example, in (12) the evaluative adjective *lekker* ‘delicious, nice’ modified by *helemaal* construes a property of feeling good as reaching a contextually relevant maximum value.

- (12) Ik voel me **helemaal lekker** ik voel me honderd procent
 I feel myself completely fine I feel myself hundred percent
 zingt hij.
 sings he
 ‘I feel totally fine, I feel one hundred percent, he is singing.’

Similarly, the combination of the minimum-standard adjective *scheel* ‘cross-eyed’ with *helemaal* in (13) is used to denote a point at which the addressee’s health reaches the worst possible state. By combining the relative adjective *lichtgewicht* ‘lightweight’ with *helemaal* in (14) the speaker suggests that the chairs were blown off the boat because they were as light as lightweight chairs can be.

- (13) Ga je gang. Rook je **helemaal scheel** man.
 go your way smoke yourself completely cross-eyed man
 ‘Go on this way. Smoke until you drop, man.’

(14) Dat waren natuurlijk **helemaal lichtgewicht** stoelen.

that were certainly completely lightweight chairs

‘Those were of course completely lightweight chairs.’

Another situation licensing the use of *helemaal* with unbounded adjectives in general and unbounded minimum-standard adjectives in particular is what Hoeksema (2008) terms *superlative* use, where *helemaal* bears a contrastive stress on the last syllable. In superlative uses, two or more entities are compared in terms of a property denoted by the adjective. Combinations with *helemaal* are employed to mark the highest degree of the property within the range under comparison. The function of the adverb in such cases is indeed similar to that of superlatives. By way of illustration, consider example

(15):

(15) A: Ja en dan heb je nog 't onderwerp opvoeden ligt al

yes and then have you more the topic upbringing lies already

heleMAAL **gevaarlijk** omdat een uh en ...

completely dangerous because an uh and

‘Yeah, and then you also have the topic of upbringing, the most dangerous of

all because a uh and ...’

B: omdat iedereen wel z'n kinderen anders wil opvoeden.

because everyone rather his children differently wants raise

‘because everyone wants to raise his children in a different way.’

In the context preceding (15), A and B were discussing a list of taboo topics in B's family. For instance, talking about the future was inappropriate because B's parents were

very old. Discussions of people's figures were avoided because of a family member with a history of anorexia. Conversations about food were undesirable because of grandmother's health or attitude. The topic boy- and girlfriends was to be evaded because B's siblings always hated each others' partners. Finally, the upbringing theme is introduced in (15) and described as the most delicate of all the topics mentioned so far due to considerable disagreements on the matter. The combination *helemaal gevaarlijk* 'completely dangerous' in this case can be paraphrased as 'even more dangerous than the previous topics' or 'the most dangerous of all'.

Finally, in some contexts in which *helemaal* is used to modify an unbounded minimum-standard adjective, the adverb itself gets an unbounded, booster-like interpretation denoting a very high, but not a maximum degree of a property. Booster-like instances were attested in combination with unbounded adjectives of the minimum-standard, evaluative and relative type; witness examples (16)-(18) respectively.

(16) Hij is **helemaal trots** op dat ding.
 he is completely proud on that thing
 'He is very proud of that thing.'

(17) Toen was ik **helemaal blij**.
 then was I completely glad
 'At that moment I was extremely glad.'

(18) En ik heb helemaal niet zo'n zin om daar zo **helemaal diep**
 and I have completely not such.a wish CONJ there so completely deep
 in die technische materie in te gaan.

in that technical matter in to go

‘And I do not at all feel like going very deep into that technical subject matter.’

We also witnessed a number of ambiguous instances, where *helemaal* may have both a maximizer and a booster reading, which is an indication of an ongoing semantic change. For example, the combination of *helemaal* with the adjective *verliefd* ‘amorous, in love’ in (19) can be understood as ‘very much in love’ or as ‘completely in love’.

(19) Op moment heb ik drie maanden een vriendin en ik ben echt
on moment have I three months a girlfriend and I am really
helemaal verliefd.

completely in.love

‘At the moment I have had a girlfriend for three months and I am head over heels
in love with her.’

Quantitative results of the analyses reported in this section are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Senses of *helemaal* modifying unbounded adjectives

	Minimum-standard		Evaluative		Relative	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Booster	54	40%	22	35%	13	24%
Booster/maximizer	24	17%	0	0%	0	0%
Extension	34	25%	11	18%	10	18%
Maximum degree	12	9%	2	3%	8	15%
Superlative use	12	9%	27	44%	22	41%

A loglinear analysis showed a significant adjective type by adverb sense interaction: $\chi^2(2) = 23.6, p < 0.001$. The booster sense of *helemaal* is over-represented in the group of unbounded minimum-standard adjectives ($z = 2.5$). Combinations of the booster-

helemaal with relative and evaluative adjectives were not significantly different from the expected distribution ($z_1 = -1.9$; $Z_2 = -1.8$). The finding that *helemaal* as a booster is more frequent in combination with minimum-standard adjectives might be related to the semantic properties of minimum-standard adjectives, on the one hand, and relative and evaluative adjectives, on the other hand. The former belong to the class of absolute adjectives interpreted with respect to a context-independent reference point, whereas the interpretation of the latter bears upon a context-dependent standard of comparison (see Section 2.1). It might be easier to combine a maximizer with adjectives having a fixed standard of comparison. Another difference between minimum-standard adjectives and the other two groups is that unbounded minimum-standard terms evoke half-closed scales, whereas relative and evaluative adjectives are associated with scales open at both ends. It is plausible to assume that the presence of, at least, one scale boundary facilitates combinability with maximizers. Future research should investigate this issue in detail.

4.2.2. Non-gradable adjectives

Since *helemaal* is a degree modifier, it should in principle be incompatible with non-gradable adjectives, because these words denote properties which are not associated with degrees. In line with this prediction, there are relatively few cases in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch where *helemaal* modifies a non-gradable adjective (N=21).

A closer look at these contexts reveals that *helemaal* is combined with non-gradable adjectives in two kinds of situations. In half of the relevant instances (N=10), *helemaal* was used with reference to the extension of a referent. For example, in (20) the whole train station is said to be located underground.

(20) Uhm het station ligt **helemaal ondergronds** uhm.

hm the station lies completely underground hm

‘Hm the station is completely underground hm.’

In the other half of the cases (N=11) *helemaal* is combined with the spatial adjectives *links* ‘left’ and *rechts* ‘right’ to denote the farthest point in a particular direction. Witness the following example:

(21) Dus een heel bord vol bewerkingen. Tot **helemaal**

thus a whole blackboard full operations till completely

rechts onderaan.

right below

‘So a whole blackboard full of calculations. All the way to the right bottom corner.’

Uses such as (21) are in a sense similar to instances such as (20) because in both cases application of *helemaal* is facilitated by profiling the extension of an entity – a station in (20) and a blackboard in (21). A crucial difference between these two types of contexts is that in the former case *helemaal* maps directly to the extension of the entity (the whole station), whereas contexts like (21) profile a maximum degree of a property (distance from a reference point to a target in a particular direction). Thus, in contexts such as (20) and (21) *helemaal* is still used in its original maximizer function.

4.3. Qualitative analysis of negated *helemaal*

So far we have only considered cases where *helemaal* was used in affirmative constructions. In this section, we will scrutinize contexts in which *helemaal* is preceded by the negative particle *niet* ‘not’ (N=258). These cases are considered separately because prior research shows that negation has important implications for the semantics of degree modifiers in general and *helemaal* in particular (Hoeksema, 2008).

Tribushinina (2008a:256-257) has argued that *not completely* can be interpreted both compositionally (‘not maximally’) and metalinguistically (‘not really’). In compositional cases, the negated maximizer suggests that a maximum degree of a property is approached, but not attained. For example, a container which is *not completely full* is probably filled to a high degree, but not to the brim. Since compositional cases always evoke the idea of a maximum degree, such an interpretation is most likely when a maximizer combines with maximum-standard adjectives. In contrast, metalinguistic uses signal that a minimum degree of a property is not reached. For instance, someone called *not completely tall* is a bit too short to qualify for the attribution *tall* and falls within a grey area between the ranges of *tall* and *short*. Metalinguistic uses can be paraphrased as ‘you cannot really call it ADJ’. Such minimum-anchored uses are most frequent in combinations with adjectives evoking (partly) open scales, including relative, evaluative and unbounded minimum-standard adjectives.

Unbounded and non-gradable adjectives should be incompatible with maximizers, but nevertheless are modified by *niet helemaal* in 25% of the relevant occurrences. A qualitative analysis of these contexts reveals that in 48 cases (75%) *niet helemaal* has a metalinguistic interpretation. For example, consider (22):

- (22) Uh maar uh dat ging dus **niet helemaal goed** met de laatste trein.
uh but uh that went thus not completely good with the last train

‘Uh but uh so it went not really well with the last train.’

In most cases where *niet helemaal* is used metalinguistically it has a euphemistic function. For instance, the speaker in (22) describes the fact that she missed the train as being ‘not completely good’, which is a euphemistic substitute for ‘not good’. However, sometimes metalinguistic uses of *niet helemaal* have an ironic interpretation as in (23) where a mildly positive characterization of the subject is provided by negating a negative property.

(23) 't is maar dat is een dat is een een bereisd figuur en
it is PCL that is a that is a a widely.traveled figure and
die is ook **niet helemaal achterlijk** en dat is een leuke vent.
that is also not completely backward and that is a nice guy
‘It’s just that ... it is .. it is a widely-traveled person and he is also not completely
backward and it is a nice guy.’

Further, *niet helemaal* is combined with unbounded adjectives when a maximum reference point is established by context. In such cases – which account for 23% of the combinations of unbounded adjectives with negated *helemaal* – unbounded scales are reconceptualized as having an upper boundary. An upper boundary is usually supplied by the extension of the modified noun as in (24) or a contingent entity as in (25). The speaker in (24) has not filled in the whole form properly yet; thus ‘not completely good’ here applies to the extension of filling in the form rather than to a degree of goodness. Likewise, the speaker in (25) suggests that the curtains in the study do not have to cover the whole wall (from ceiling to floor).

(24) Ik heb 't **niet helemaal goed** ingevuld.

I have it not completely good filled.in

'I have not filled all of it in properly.'

(25) Nou in de studeerkamer hoeft 't van mij betreft ook **niet**

well in the study need it from me concerns also not

helemaal lang.

completely long

'Well as far as I am concerned, they [curtains] do not have to be totally long in the study either.'

A scale can also be construed as a bounded one in cases where an adjective is used in a different, maximum-oriented sense. For instance, (26) is part of a conversation about the mental condition of an elderly person who sometimes has delusions. In this context, *goed* has a maximum-standard sense of 'normal, mentally healthy' and is therefore compatible with the maximizer *helemaal*.

(26) Ik denk hij is misschien **niet helemaal goed**.

I think he is perhaps not completely good

'I think he is perhaps not completely healthy.'

We attested only one case where *niet helemaal* has a booster sense of 'not very'; witness (27):

(27) Je hoeft uh **niet helemaal vroeg** uh o naar op zoek naar
 you need uh not completely early uh oh to on search to
 een camping of zo omdat ja nou goed.
 a camping or so because yeah well good
 ‘You do not need uh to start too early uh .. to search for a camping or something
 ... yeah all right.’

In summary, when *helemaal* is preceded by the negative particle *niet* ‘not’, it may be combined with both bounded and unbounded adjectives. In the latter case, the adverb is either used metalinguistically or relies on a contextually given maximum value. The booster sense is not yet spread in negative constructions.

4.4. Stylistic, geographical and demographical spreading of the booster sense

In this section, we will focus on sociolinguistic features of the new booster sense of *helemaal*. More specifically, we seek to determine whether the booster sense is equally often used in both varieties of Dutch (Netherlandic Dutch *vs.* Belgian Dutch), in formal and informal speech, by male *vs.* female speakers, and by younger *vs.* older speakers.

Based on previous research, we make the following predictions. First, it is quite possible that the semantic change of *helemaal* from a maximizer to a booster only affects one variety of Dutch. After policy-driven convergence between Netherlandic Dutch and Belgian Dutch in the second half of the twentieth century (Geeraerts, 2001; Janssens and Marynissen, 2003:196), recent research reports a new tendency towards divergence between the two varieties (e.g. Diepeveen et al., 2006). This tendency is presumably related to the growing feeling of national identity in Flanders accompanied by an anti-Hollandic attitude (Taeldeman, 1992; Goossens, 2000). As a consequence,

young Belgian people are now increasingly relying on endogenous Belgian Dutch, and on Brabantic variants in particular (Vandekerchhove, 2005). Given the ongoing divergence between the varieties of Dutch spoken in Belgium and in the Netherlands, it is plausible that the development of the new sense will be attested only in one variety.

Second, meaning change usually starts in spontaneous speech (Labov, 1972). Therefore, the booster sense of *helemaal* is more likely to be attested in informal conversations than in more formal registers, such as news-reports, lectures, ceremonial speeches and interviews.

Third, sociolinguistic research has repeatedly shown that women tend to use innovative forms more often than men (e.g. Labov, 1972, 1990; Stroop, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Foulkes and Docherty, 1999; Kloots et al., 2004). Furthermore, female speakers are known to speak more emphatically and to use more intensifying adverbs than men (Lakoff, 1975; Herbert, 1990; Johnson and Roen, 1992; Bradac et al., 1995). Therefore, it is plausible to hypothesize that the booster sense of *helemaal* is more frequently used by women than by men.

Finally, young generations are also known to play a key role in the processes of language change (Labov, 1973; Eckert, 1984, 1988). Thus, we are likely to attest the booster sense of *helemaal* primarily in the speech of younger people.

In order to test these hypotheses, we coded all instances of *helemaal* used as a booster and all utterances in which *helemaal* was ambiguous between a booster and a maximizer (N=115) in terms of national variety (Netherlandic Dutch vs. Belgian Dutch), register, sex and age of the speaker.

The results show that *helemaal* is used as a booster almost exclusively in the Netherlandic variety of Dutch. More precisely, 97% of the booster-like uses in the corpus were produced by speakers of Netherlandic Dutch. The Belgian part of the corpus con-

tains only 2 booster-like uses and 2 ambiguous cases. A chi-square test shows that the proportion of booster-like instances relative to the total number of adjective-modifying uses of *helemaal* is significantly higher in the Netherlandic part of the corpus: $\chi^2 (1) = 12.6, p < 0.001$. This finding is probably related to the ongoing divergence between the two varieties. On the other hand, given that semantic change from a maximizer to a booster has proved to have general cross-linguistic validity (Peters, 1994; Lorenz, 2002; Nevalainen and Rissanen, 2002; Mendez-Naya, 2003; Xmelevskij 2003; Tribushinina, 2008b), it is not excluded that this development will also affect Belgian Dutch in future.

Further, as predicted, all booster uses of *helemaal* were attested exclusively in spontaneous conversations, of which one instance was in a telephone conversation and 114 cases in face-to-face interaction.

Since the gender- and age-based subcorpora vary in size from 588,072 words in the subcorpus of male speakers aged 18-24 to 1,015,216 words in the subcorpus of female speakers aged 18 to 24, we cannot compare the absolute numbers of booster instances produced by speakers of different ages and sexes. Therefore, we calculated the proportion of booster instances of *helemaal* relative to the total number of adjective-modifying uses of *helemaal* per subcorpus. The distinction between younger and older speakers was operationalized in two age groups – speakers younger than 35 years and those older than 35 years. Six instances produced by male speakers were excluded from analysis, because the age of these speakers was not specified in the corresponding meta-files. Figure 2 shows the ratio of booster uses of *helemaal* by age and sex of the speakers.

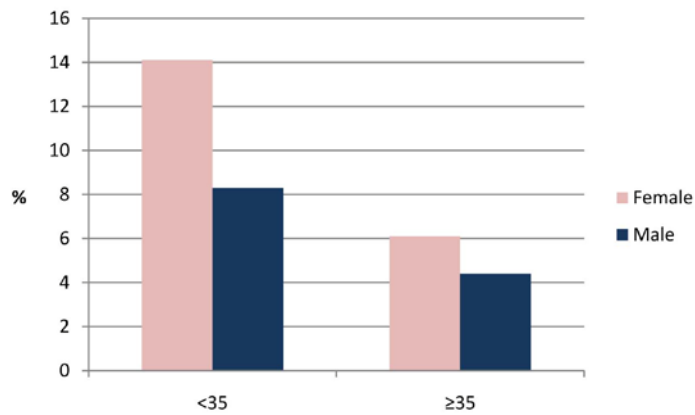


Figure 2. Proportion of booster-like instances of *helemaal* by age and sex

A three-way contingency table – age (<35, ≥35); sex (male, female); sense of *helemaal* (booster, maximizer) – was subjected to a hierarchical loglinear analysis using a backward elimination procedure. The analysis revealed a significant sex by sense interaction: $\chi^2(1) = 5.7, p = 0.017$. As shown in Figure 2, female speakers use *helemaal* as a booster significantly more often than male speakers. The age by sense interaction was also significant: $\chi^2(1) = 29.4, p < 0.001$. As hypothesized, the booster sense is more spread in the speech of younger people, which corroborates the claim that *helemaal* is undergoing a process of meaning change.

In summary, the booster sense of *helemaal* has developed in spontaneous speech of young people speaking Netherlandic Dutch and has hardly extended to Belgian Dutch. The booster sense is more frequent in the speech of women than in that of men.

5. Conclusions

This study has targeted semantic and contextual mechanisms involved in an ongoing meaning change of the Dutch adverb *helemaal* from a maximizer meaning ‘completely’ to a booster meaning ‘very’. Following the boundedness hypothesis (Paradis, 2001, 2008; Paradis and Willners, 2006), we predicted that combinations of a closed-scale

degree adverb (*helemaal*) with open-scale adjectives destroy the essential configurational harmony between an adjective and its modifier. We advanced a hypothesis that configurational harmony can be restored in two ways: either an adjectival scale gets a non-default (bounded) conceptualization through contextual modulation or a degree adverb is re-conceptualized as an unbounded modifier. Both these predictions are borne out by the data in this study.

Helemaal is combined with unbounded (relative, evaluative, minimum-standard) adjectives in 24% of the *helemaal*-adjective combinations in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch. In about half of these non-harmonious combinations *helemaal* retains its maximizer sense, but an adjectival scale is contextually re-construed as having an upper boundary. Our study revealed three ways in which an upper boundary can be evoked for an adjective which is, by default, associated with an unbounded scale. First, a maximum value becomes relevant when *helemaal* is used in a contrastive sense, which is distinguished by a contrastive stress on the last syllable. In such cases, *helemaal* functions as a kind of superlative marker and suggests that a degree of a property in a particular entity is higher than in all other entities constituting the contextually given comparison set. Second, a maximum boundary can be provided by the extension of a described object. In this case, *helemaal* does not modify degree proper; rather, it suggests that the whole object (or its active zone) is involved in the relation denoted by the adjective. Third, an unbounded adjectival scale can be re-construed as having an upper boundary when it is clear from the context that an object possesses the highest degree of a property that can be attained under particular circumstances.

The finding that *helemaal* is combined with unbounded adjectives while maintaining its maximizer semantics in 55% of the relevant cases strongly suggests that there is no one-to-one relation between scale types and adjective types (cf. Tribushinina,

2008a). For example, the fact that relative adjectives are by default interpreted with respect to a relative standard of comparison located in the mid-zone of a scale (Kennedy and McNally, 2005; Kennedy, 2007) does not preclude contextual activation of other reference points, such as a maximum value of the property. The fact that such cases constitute more than a half of the combinations of *helemaal* with unbounded adjectives in the corpus strongly suggests that cases of contextual modulation should not be seen as exceptions. Rather, contextually relevant conceptualizations of adjectival properties are very normal and frequent in natural communication, which corroborates the view of meaning as based on conceptualization and dynamic construal (cf. Langacker, 1987; Croft and Cruse, 2004; Paradis, 2005; Janssen, 2007; Verhagen, 2007).

In the remaining 45% of the cases where *helemaal* modifies unbounded adjectives, configurational harmony is restored in a different way. In these cases, the degree modifier itself is re-conceptualized as an unbounded term. Speakers loosen the maximizer semantics of *helemaal* and conceptualize it as a booster expressing a very high, but not a maximum degree of a property. Initially, such a re-conceptualization should take place *ad hoc* every time a speaker chooses to combine a maximizer with an unbounded adjective for emphatic purposes of subjective evaluation. When such innovative combinations grow in types and numbers, conceptual mapping between *helemaal* and unbounded scales becomes increasingly conventional and entrenched, which triggers its semantic change from a maximizer to a booster.

In line with previous research on linguistic change, our study has shown that innovative (booster-like) uses of *helemaal* are primarily employed by younger people. Further, female speakers use more innovative combinations than male speakers, which is also consistent with prior sociolinguistic investigations. Interestingly enough, a semantic change of *helemaal* from a maximizer to a booster has so far only affected Ne-

therlandic Dutch, but hardly Belgian Dutch. This finding adds to the body of previous research demonstrating that the two varieties of Dutch are currently diverging in a number of domains, including lexicon, morphology and syntax.

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Vitae

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