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Author(s)	Kikuchi, Yuki
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A NOTE ON SEMANTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF RESULTATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS WITH *VERY A*

1 INTRODUCTION

English resultative predicates, which appear in the XP slot of the basic form [NP V NP XP], are said to indicate the result of the action denoted by the main verb (V). In studies of resultative constructions, adjectives which occur as resultative predicates (i.e., result APs) have often been analyzed in terms of the telicity of events and scalar structure.

A notable feature of resultative constructions is to denote a telic event, and result APs are interpreted as denoting the endpoint on the scale (Vanden Wyngaerd 2001, Wechsler 2005). In the case of (1), the result AP *flat* functions as a telic bound for the hammering event.

- (1) Resultatives (predicate in italics; its subject underlined):

John hammered the metal *flat*.

⇒ ‘John hammered the metal; as a result, the metal became flat.’

(Wechsler 2005: 256)

In addition to this observation, the telicity of events implied in the resultative constructions is related to (un)acceptability of *very* modification for result APs. For the behavior of *very*, Vanden Wyngaerd (2001) claims the following. In the sentence *Tim danced himself tired*, the adjective *tired* has a bounded-scale interpretation when it occurs as a result AP. The degree modifier *very* just qualifies an unbounded scale and therefore the result AP *tired* cannot be modified by *very*, as in **Tim danced himself very tired*. However, we find the form *very A* (i.e., an adjective modified by *very*) is acceptable as a result AP in resultative constructions, based on the *OED* and the corpora data. In this paper, I discuss the semantic interpretations of resultative constructions with *very A*, and suggest that result APs like *clean*, *smooth*, and *small* accept modification by *very* regardless of properties of scalar structure inherent in adjectives.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews Vanden Wyngaerd (2001) and Wechsler (2005) as previous studies, and shows the general accounts of scalar

structure of resultative predicates. In Section 3, I investigate how the semantics of resultative constructions with *very A* can be interpreted through the data collected primarily from the corpora. Section 4 concludes with a summary of discussions.

2 PREVIOUS STUDIES

2.1 Vanden Wyngaerd (2001)

According to Vanden Wyngaerd (2001), who primarily observes the (un)bounded properties of adjectives in Dutch and English, resultative predicates are seen as measuring out the event described by the main predicate of a sentence. When the adjectives that denote unbounded scales are used as secondary predicates in resultative constructions, they can designate bounded-scale properties. For example, the adjectives *tired*, *hoarse*, *thin*, and *silly* originally denote an unbounded scale. They do not have the endpoint of the scale, and the standard of the scale depends on the context. As shown in (2), modification by *very* is acceptable in the non-resultative constructions.

- (2) a. Tim is very/completely/almost/half tired.
 b. Max is very/completely/almost/half hoarse.
 c. The pavement is very/?completely/?almost/?half thin.
 d. Charley is very/completely/almost/half silly.

(Vanden Wyngaerd 2001: 65)

Since the degree adverb *very* is an intensifier that qualifies unbounded scales, the adjectives in (2) can be modified by *very*. These adjectives also tend to be compatible with modifiers such as *completely*, *almost*, and *half*, though the acceptability of their modification varies according to each adjective (cf. (2c)).

On the other hand, when the adjectives in (2) appear in resultative constructions, they cannot be modified by *very*:

- (3) a. Tim danced himself {completely/almost/half/*very} tired.
 b. Max shouted himself {completely/almost/half/*very} hoarse.
 c. The joggers ran the pavement {completely/almost/half/*very} thin.
 d. Charley laughed himself {completely/almost/half/*very} silly.

(Vanden Wyngaerd 2001: 64)

The examples in (3) are called “fake reflexive resultatives,” which are based on intransitive verbs and take reflexive pronouns as fake objects. Unergative verbs such as *dance*, *shout*, *run*, and *laugh* are durational activity verbs, which do not have

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the endpoint of events inherently. Since resultative constructions involve the telicity of events, resultative predicates need to describe the properties of a bounded scale. The adjectives *tired*, *hoarse*, *thin*, and *silly* in (3) change their scalar structures from unboundedness to boundedness, and therefore, they can function as measuring out the event described by the verbs. Since the modifier *completely* intensifies the boundedness of an event, it must modify the adjectives that have the properties of a bounded scale. From these observations, Vanden Wyngaerd proposes the generalization in (4).

(4) Restriction on Resultatives:

Resultative predicates denote a bounded scale.

(Vanden Wyngaerd 2001: 64)

He claims that the unbounded-scale adjectives occurring as resultative predicates shift to a bounded-scale interpretation on the basis of the restriction in (4). This restriction is the boundedness requirement imposed on resultative predicates, which can serve as delimiting an event rather than referring to an endpoint.

Vanden Wyngaerd's view is summarized as follows. Resultative predicates are subject to a bounded scale requirement. Therefore, when the adjectives that inherently denote unbounded scales occur in resultative constructions, they change into bounded-scale interpretations and do not permit modification by *very*.

2.2 Wechsler (2005)

For the semantics of adjectives, Wechsler (2005) claims that they are classified into two types: gradable and non-gradable adjectives. Gradable adjectives, such as *long* and *flat* in (5a) accept degree modifiers such as *very* and comparative forms. In contrast, non-gradable adjectives, such as *dead* and *triangular* in (5b), reject degree modifiers and comparative forms.

(5) a. Gradable adjectives:

very/quite/extremely {*long/ flat/ expensive/ straight/ full/ dull*}
longer, flatter, more expensive, straighter, fuller, duller

b. Non-gradable adjectives:

??*very/quite/extremely* {*dead/ triangular/ invited/ sold*}
??*more dead/ triangular/ invited/ sold*

(Wechsler 2005: 262)

Furthermore, gradable adjectives fall into two types: closed-scale and open-scale adjectives. According to Wechsler, closed-scale adjectives such as *clean*, *dry*, and *smooth* have the maximal endpoint of the scale as a default, and the scale is

independent of the context.¹ In contrast, open-scale adjectives such as *damp*, *dirty*, *stained*, and *wet* lack such an inherent maximal endpoint and must rely on the context for their standards. Based on these views, Wechsler argues that closed-scale adjectives (*clean*, *dry*, and *smooth*) and non-gradable adjectives (*dead*) appear as resultative predicates, as shown in (6) and (7).

(6) He wiped it clean / dry / smooth / *damp / *dirty / *stained / *wet.

(7) He and a confederate shot the miller dead.

(Wechsler 2005: 265, 267)

As already mentioned, resultative constructions denote a telic event. Therefore, adjectives such as *damp* and *dirty* cannot occur as resultative predicates in resultative constructions, though this construction, as in *We danced ourselves tired*, *The dog barked itself hoarse*, and *I ate myself sick*, does not block the occurrences of open-scale adjectives such as *tired*, *hoarse*, and *sick* in the result AP slot.

3 INVESTIGATIONS OF RESULTATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS WITH *VERY A*

In Sections 2.1 and 2.2, I have presented an outline of the scalar structure of resultative predicates developed by Vanden Wyngaerd (2001) and Wechsler (2005). These previous studies have focused on the telicity of events in resultative constructions and the property of result APs, which have the endpoint of the scale and provide a suitable telic bound for the event. From this evidence, we may assume that regardless of whether *clean*, *smooth*, and *small* originally denote bounded or unbounded scales, their adjectives cannot be modified by *very* when they occur as resultative predicates. However, there are some examples where such result APs are compatible with modification by *very* in resultative constructions.

In this section, I focus on resultative constructions including the form *very A* and analyze their semantic interpretations. By examining how the result AP *very A* are construed in the context, I discuss the possible interpretations of resultative constructions with *very A*.

3.1 *The Meaning and Function of Very*

Before moving on to the examination of resultative constructions with *very A*, I will briefly outline the meaning and function of the degree modifier *very*.

According to Kennedy and McNally (1999, 2005), *very* is strongly connected with

¹ Wechsler's claim that the adjectives *clean*, *dry*, and *smooth* originally have the endpoint of the scale remains controversial. Intuitively, the degrees of cleanliness, dryness, and smoothness seem to depend on the context.

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relative adjectives (e.g., *tall* and *expensive*), whereas absolute adjectives (e.g., *open* and *available*) reject modification by *very*. Based on Klein (1980), Kennedy and McNally account for the difference between *tall* and *very tall* as follows:

- (8) For example, in a context in which the standard of comparison for the adjective (phrase) *tall* is the average degree of height for the comparison class *basketball players*, the standard of comparison for the AP *very tall* is an average of height for just the tall basketball players. As a result, some basketball players who count as tall will not count as very tall, and the standard will be effectively raised.

(Kennedy and McNally 2005: 370)

That is, *very* has the effect of raising the contextually determined standard of comparison by some amount.² Consider the difference between (9a) and (9b) in accordance with Kennedy and McNally's explanation.

- (9) a. Yuta Watanabe is tall.
b. Yuta Watanabe is very tall.

The sentence (9a) will be true if Yuta's height is greater than or equal to the contextually determined standard of tallness for *basketball players* (e.g., their average height is 188cm), and the sentence (9b) will be true if Yuta is tall compared to the set of *tall basketball players* (e.g., their average height is 196cm).

Thus, the *very* standard is a norm or average calculated on the basis of, for example, individuals who have the property denoted by the adjective *tall* in the context of basketball players. If the degree to which an object is *A* (Yuta is tall) exceeds a norm or average on the "tallness" scale for the comparison class "tall basketball players," *very A* holds for the object.

3.2 Analysis

Drawing on the above accounts, I will analyze the semantic interpretations of

² Kennedy and McNally (2005) show the denotation of *very* associated with a context *c* in parallel to the analysis of the *pos* morpheme as follows. They argue that the simple unmodified APs such as *tall* and *expensive* contain "a null degree morpheme *pos*."

(i) $\llbracket pos \rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [\text{standard}(d)(G)(C) \wedge G(d)(x)]$

(ii) $\llbracket very \rrbracket^c = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [\text{standard}(d)(G)(\lambda y. \llbracket pos(G)(y) \rrbracket^c) \wedge G(d)(x)]$

(Kennedy and McNally 2005: 350, 370)

For the denotations in (i) and (ii), Kennedy and McNally (2005: 370) explain the following: "In the case of *pos*, this relation [= the **standard** relation] requires the degree argument of an adjective *G* to exceed a norm for a comparison class determined by the contextual property variable *C*. In the case of *very*, however, the comparison class is lexically specified: it is those objects that have the property *G* in the context of utterance." For more detailed discussion, see Kennedy and McNally (2005).

resultative constructions with *very A*. In the literature, researchers have claimed that resultative constructions denote a telic event, and thus their interpretations should be related to the telicity of events. Suppose, then, that the result AP *very A* in this construction measures out the event described by the main verb.

First, let us observe resultative sentences with *very clean*. As mentioned in Section 2.2, *clean* is a closed-scale adjective that originally has the endpoint of the scale. When appearing in the resultative constructions, *clean* represents the result state of an object receiving some action denoted by the verb and, in accordance with previous studies, should not permit modification by *very*. However, *very clean* in (10) occurs as a result AP that provides a suitable telic bound for the event.

- (10) a. They sweep a place very clean to sift the lime in, and when it is sifted they make it up in a heap. (Visser 1963: 585)
- b. Gather your Quinces when they are dry, and wipe them very clean with a coarse Cloth, then grate them with a coarse Grater or a Rasp, as near the Core as you can, ... (CLMET3.0)
- c. A pretty waggon is better than an ugly hearse, after all. Joseph, have the new spring waggon with the blue body and red wheels, and wash it very clean. (CLMET3.0)

The *to*-infinitive phrase in (10a) describes the purpose of sifting the lime, and *very clean* seems to be construed as the degree required partly by the subject *they* so that a place becomes clean enough to sift it. In the situation of a place's being very clean as a result of sweeping, the comparison class for *very clean* will be the set of "the clean place" suitable for sifting the lime. If the degree of cleanliness of the place meets or exceeds the norm assumed by the subject compared to the set of the clean place, *very clean* will be regarded as referring to the result state of the place. The fact that the adjective *clean* accepts modification by *very* in such resultative sentences also shows the association with subjective construal. The underlined expressions in (10b) and (10c) are imperative sentences, and each speaker is likely to require the other person to wipe quinces or wash a waggon so that they become clean to some extent as a result of the action denoted by the transitive verbs *wipe* or *wash*.

Next, consider examples of resultative sentences with *very smooth*. *Smooth* is also a closed-scale adjective according to Wechsler (2005) and when it appears in resultative constructions, *smooth* should reject modification by *very*. Despite such traditional views, *very smooth* in (11) occurs as a kind of result AP.

- (11) a. The rabbits were painted with three coats of white paint, the base plates with two coats of black. First, the wood was sandpapered very smooth, then after each coat of paint had dried, the surfaces were again sanded with fine sandpaper. (COCA)
- b. After finishing enamel-filling next step is polishing. In this step Workers will polish cloisonné ware very smooth. (GloWbE)
- c. Cool the potatoes and then peel. Now mash the potatoes very smooth. (GloWbE)

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The standard of comparison for the adjective *smooth* ‘not rough’ in (11a) is the average degree of smoothness for the comparison class “the surface of the wood.” The underlined expression in (11a) is a passive sentence, and shows the wood became very smooth as a result of being sandpapered. If the degree of smoothness of a wood surface sandpapered by someone was equal to or above the norm assumed by the speaker, *very smooth* can be interpreted as a sort of endpoint of the rubbing event and as the standard of smoothness within the set of “the smooth woods.” In addition, we may find the later scene in (11a) implies someone’s purpose for rubbing the surface of the wood with fine sandpaper after the paint dryness.

The underlined expression in (11b) is a normal resultative sentence, and the one in (11c) is an imperative sentence. In each case, the comparison classes “cloisonné wares” and “potatoes” are initially determined by the context, and in turn, the standard of comparison for *very smooth* is interpreted as an average degree of smoothness for “the smooth cloisonné wares” or “the smooth potatoes.”

Thus, the standard of comparison for the result state of an object implied in (11) is raised by *very*, and the result AP *very smooth* can function to subjectively delimit an event.

Furthermore, let us turn our attention to resultative sentences with *very thin*, *very short*, or *very small*. This type of resultative is called a “spurious resultative” in Washio’s (1997) terminology, and in this construction an affected entity that occurs in the causing event is not identical to an entity in the result event. Open-scale adjectives such as *thin*, *short*, and *small*, which designate bounded-scale properties in resultative constructions, can be modified by *very* as shown in (12).

- (12) a. Slice grilled steak very thin, diagonally against the grain, so the steak will be tender. (COCA)
 b. He would cut the grass very short, and then rake up the clippings and pile them in the garden, smothering the vines and the stalks so that they could brew in the fall, on those late hot days. (COCA)
 c. He read all the way back to the opening (“Dear Uncle Anthony”) then folded the letter very small, and put it into the box with the others when he got back to his room that evening. (COCA)

The underlined expression in (12a), which is an imperative sentence, means that “the slice of grilled steak” newly created through the slicing event will be in the result state described by *very thin*. This sentence may give the subjective interpretation to us, because the speaker in (12a) requests the hearer to cut the steak into slices in such a way that it is soft and easy to chew. The comparison class for the result AP *very thin* in (12a) is the set of “the thinly cut slices of grilled steak,” and *very thin* is true of the sliced steak if the degree to which it is thin meets or exceeds the standard of thinness assumed by the speaker with respect to the thinly cut slices of grilled steak.

The same analysis holds for examples of (12b) and (12c). In (12b), as described by an adjunct that expresses purpose (i.e., the *that*-clause governed by *so*), the subject *he* seems to cut the grass to the proper length for the final purpose of brewing tea on late autumn days. The standard of comparison for the result AP *very short* is a norm

of length for “the grass clippings occurring after being mowed short,” and *very short* can be interpreted as an average degree of length required partly by the subject. In (12c), the intended meaning of the underlined resultative sentence is as follows: he folded the letter, and as a result, the size of the folded letter became to some extent small. The folded letter is also about the size of a box and he puts it into the box. The standard of comparison for the result AP *very small* is a norm of size for “the small folded letter” and *very small* can represent some degree of size of the letter he requires.

As in (10) and (11), the form *very A* in (12) can also serve as a resultative predicate that provides the subjective endpoint for the event described by the main verb.

3.3 The Behavior of *Very A* Used as a Result AP

As illustrated in Section 3.2, adjectives such as *clean*, *smooth*, or *small* accept modification by *very* when they are used as resultative predicates in resultative constructions, regardless of the property of scalar structure inherent in each adjective. In addition, some resultative sentences including *very A* in (10)-(12) are accompanied by other clauses or sentences which create result or purpose interpretations. For the behavior of *very A* used as a result AP, my argument is summarized as follows:

- (13) The result AP *very A* can function as an event measurer when the result state of an affected object fulfills a contextual standard assumed partly by the speaker or someone else in order to accomplish some purpose or realize some result.

If a result AP maintains the inherent property of a resultative predicate, that is, the property of delimiting the event described by the main verb, the form *very A* can be established as a result AP and imply the subjective judgment of the result state of an affected object.

4 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I briefly outlined the scalar structure of resultative predicates in Vanden Wyngaerd (2001) and Wechsler (2005), and examined the semantic interpretations of resultative constructions with the result AP *very A*, based on Kennedy and McNally’s (2005) view of the standard-raising effect of *very*. Through this analysis, I suggested that if the degree of the result state of an object is equal to or above the standard on the *A*-scale assumed by the speaker for some purpose or realization, *very A* might provide a suitable telic bound for the event described by the verb in resultative

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constructions. However, whether *very A* used as a result AP has the endpoint of the scale will vary according to individual judgment. In this study, I was not able to adequately capture the interpretations of resultative constructions with *very A*. Therefore, I will carry out further detailed research to figure out if *very A* creates a kind of bounded-scale interpretation in resultative constructions.

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CORPORA

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DICTIONARY

Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED) <<https://www.oed.com/>>

Yuki Kikuchi

kikuchikara.24@gmail.com