

## Where is the standard?

### An analysis of size adjectives as degree modifiers at the semantic-pragmatic interface

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#### **Abstract**

Size adjectives in such languages as English and Mandarin Chinese can have degree readings when they modify gradable nouns. The DP “big idiot,” for example, can characterize an individual with a high degree of idiocy. This degree use of size adjectives has been argued in the literature to be available only for positive size adjectives (e.g., “big” and “huge”), but not for negative size adjectives (e.g., “small” and “tiny”). Although this generalization holds in most cases, in this paper I identify several “exceptional” cases where negative size adjectives indeed can felicitously modify gradable nouns. I propose an analysis at the interface between the semantics and pragmatics of gradability that can account for both the general applicability of the “Bigness Generalization,” and the exceptional cases to it. A negative size adjective can serve as a degree modifier, except in those contexts where the standard for the negative size adjective falls below the standard for the gradable noun that is modified. Such exceptional contexts have a very wide distribution, leading to the perception of general applicability of the “Bigness Generalization.”