Not Half True

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The word 'true' shows some evidence of gradability. For instance, there are cases where truth-bearers are described as 'slightly true', 'completely true' or 'very true'. Expressions that accept these types of modifiers are analysed in terms of properties that can be possessed to a greater or lesser degree. If 'true' is genuinely gradable, then it would follow that there are degrees of truth. It might also follow that 'true' is context-sensitive, like other gradable expressions. Such conclusions are difficult to reconcile with most existing theories: deflationists and inflationists alike tend to reject the thesis that one true truth-bearer can have more or less truth than another. Based on work in natural language, I argue that 'true' is not a genuinely gradable expression. I also provide an explanation of the apparent evidence for gradability. Hence there is no reason to think that there is a truth property that comes in degrees.

1. Introduction

The word 'true' displays some similar behaviour to *gradable adjectives* ('open', 'clean', 'tall', etc.). Just as something can be described as 'slightly open', 'completely clean' or 'very tall', there are cases where truth-bearers are described as 'slightly true', 'completely true' or 'very true'. Expressions that accept these types of modifiers are analysed in terms of *graded properties*, which objects can possess to a greater or lesser degree. A window can be described as 'slightly open', 'completely open' or 'more open than the door' because there are degrees of openness, which contribute to the meaning. Moreover, some gradable adjectives are context-sensitive: whether an individual counts as 'tall' depends on the context. If 'true' is a gradable adjective, then it would follow that there are degrees of truth, and that 'true' might be context-sensitive.

According to some in the recent literature, the evidence is clear: 'true' *is* a gradable adjective, so we must accept these consequences (Henderson 2019, 2021; Égré 2021). The trouble is that these consequences are incompatible with two widely held theses:[1]

[1] The fact that these theses are widely held might indicate that they are also intuitive, although empirical investigation would ultimately be required to show that ordinary speakers are naturally inclined to accept them.

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No gradation: There is no graded truth property that truth-bearers can have to a greater or lesser degree.

No variation: 'True' does not have a context-sensitive meaning: whether a truth-bearer counts as 'true' (under its literal meaning) does not depend on the context in which 'true' is used.

Theories of 'true' and truth typically accept these theses. All existing deflationary accounts accept them, as do virtually all existing inflationary accounts. The rejection of the theses would be difficult to reconcile with any deflationary account, and with a number of inflationary ones. Indeed, Wright (1998, p. 60) suggests that any candidate for a truth property should satisfy the 'platitude' that 'there is, strictly, no such thing as a proposition's being more or less true; propositions are completely true if true at all'. If 'true' is a gradable adjective, then theories that accept these theses are mistaken.

I aim to rescue the common view of truth. Based on work in natural language, I argue that 'true' is not a genuine gradable adjective. I also provide an explanation of cases where 'true' behaves like a gradable adjective.

2. The case for gradable 'true'

2.1. Gradable adjectives

Gradable adjectives have meanings that involve *graded properties*, which objects can possess to varying degrees.[2] Hence they can occur in the *unmodified form*, as in (1a)–(1c), but also with degree phrases:

(1) (a) The floor is clean.

(b) The table is dirty.

(c) Zoya is tall.

[2] One might define gradable adjectives semantically (based on the types of meanings that they have) or syntactically (based on how naturally or regularly they occur with degree phrases; see Kennedy 1997, pp. 1–2). I pursue the former strategy, owing to doubts about our ability to reliably judge the latter issue (see §3.1 below). I remain neutral on the nature of properties. They might just be thought of as sets of objects, or functions from worlds to sets of objects. Then a property would be graded when a set of objects is determined relative to a relation on a degree (that is, those objects that have the property to at least (or at most, or exactly) that degree).

(2) (a) The window is half open.

(b) The floor is completely clean.

(c) The table is slightly dirty.

(3) (a) The window is more open than the door.

(b) Zoya is taller than Zain.

Degree phrases consist of *degree modifiers* like those in (2a)–(2c), along with expressions that produce *comparative constructions* like (3a)–(3c).

The dominant analysis of gradable adjectives relates each one to a *scale*, which is a set of degrees totally ordered with respect to some dimension (size, speed, cleanliness, etc.).[3] The truth conditions of sentences with gradable adjectives require particular individuals to be mapped to a point on the relevant scale that equals, exceeds, or is exceeded by a certain degree *d*. Degree phrases explicitly specify this *d*. For instance, the truth conditions of (2a) require the window to be mapped to a degree of openness that equals the degree *d* at the half-way point of the scale. The truth conditions of (3b) require Zoya to be mapped to a degree of height that exceeds the degree *d* to which Zain is mapped. For unmodified sentences, the degree is supplied by a covert standard. The truth conditions of occurrences of (1c) require Zoya to be mapped to a degree of height that exceeds the degree *d* determined by the covert standard (say, the height of the average woman).

Gradable adjectives are divided into three categories, based on the type of covert standard associated with their unmodified form:[4]

[3] The scalar analysis is endorsed by Bartsch and Vennemann (1973), von Stechow (1984), Kennedy (1997), and Kennedy and McNally (2005). The main rival approach analyses gradable adjectives relative to domains of objects (say, people) that are partially ordered with respect to a property that can be possessed to a greater or lesser extent (say, height) (Klein 1980; Burnett 2017). Empirical evidence appears to support the scalar analysis (Kennedy 1999; Solt and Gotzner 2012). Still, the subsequent discussion could be framed in terms of the alternative approach without affecting any points of substance.

[4] The scale associated with a gradable adjective may be *lower-closed* (it has a minimum value), *upper-closed* (it has a maximum value), *totally closed* or *totally open*. Standard type and scale structure are closely correlated. Adjectives that are associated with totally open scales are relative. Adjectives that are associated with lower-closed, upper-closed or totally closed scales tend to be, respectively, minimum-standard absolute, maximum-standard absolute, and either minimum- or maximum-standard absolute. The subsequent discussion will largely ignore scale structure and frame issues in terms of standard type.

Maximum-standard absolute: The standard always specifies the *maximum* degree on the relevant scale.

Minimum-standard absolute: The standard always specifies the *minimum* degree on the relevant scale.

Relative: The standard is *context-sensitive*, and specifies different degrees on the relevant scale in different contexts.

For instance, the truth conditions for (1a) require the floor to be mapped to the maximum degree on the cleanliness scale: a surface with a speck of dirt does not strictly count as 'clean', but as 'almost clean'.[5] The truth conditions for (1b) require the floor to be mapped to some non-zero degree on the dirtiness scale: any amount of dirt is enough for a surface to count as 'dirty'. In contrast, the truth conditions for (1c) do not require Zoya to be mapped to some maximum or minimum degree on the height scale; rather, they require her to be mapped to one that exceeds the degree fixed by the context-sensitive standard. This degree might be the height of the average five-year-old, the height of the tallest adult with a chance of becoming a professional jockey, the height of a particular shelf, and so on. Whether Zoya counts as 'tall' thus depends on the context in which 'tall' is used: her height might exceed the height of the average five-year-old but not the height of the tallest potential jockey.

Gradable adjectives thus have two interesting features:

Gradation: For each gradable adjective, there is a related graded property.

Variation: Each *relative* gradable adjective '*F*' is context-sensitive: whether an item with some degree of *F*-ness counts as '*F*' (under its literal meaning) depends on the context in which '*F*' is used.

The gradation of gradable adjectives is just a consequence of their definition: they are expressions with meanings involving properties that objects can possess to varying degrees. The context-sensitivity of relative gradable adjectives also follows from their definition: the standard associated with the unmodified form determines different degrees in different contexts.

[5] Standard types are based on the strict truth conditions, rather than on loose or imprecise uses where we sometimes describe (say) a surface with a contextually ignorable amount of dirt as 'clean'; see note 27.

Is 'true' a gradable adjective, then? If so, why would this matter? These questions are considered in the following two subsections.

2.2. Testing gradable adjectives

To identify different types of gradable adjectives, modifier and entailment tests are commonly used (Rotstein and Winter 2004; Kennedy and McNally 2005). To apply *modifier tests*, a sentence is formed where the adjective is the argument of one of the following types of modifier:[6]

Proportional degree modifiers: fractions ('half' etc.), '*n* per cent', 'mostly', 'most of the way', 'all (of) the way', 'partially', 'partly'.

Upper endpoint-oriented modifiers: 'completely', 'totally', 'absolutely', 'fully', 'perfectly'.

Lower endpoint-oriented modifiers: 'slightly', 'a little'.

If the adjective is acceptable under its ordinary interpretation with at least one of these three groups of modifiers, this provides evidence that it is *absolute*. If it is acceptable only with upper endpoint-oriented modifiers, this provides evidence that it is *maximum-standard*, and if it is acceptable only with lower endpoint-oriented modifiers, this provides evidence that it is *minimum-standard*. If an adjective accepts none of these modifiers under its ordinary interpretation, then it is likely to be *relative*.

Modifier tests indicate that 'open' is absolute, 'clean' is maximum-standard absolute, 'dirty' is minimum-standard absolute, and 'tall' is relative:[7]

(4) (a) The door is (half / most of the way / completely / perfectly / slightly / a little) open.

(b) The teaspoon is (? half / ? most of the way / completely / perfectly / ? slightly / ? a little) clean.

[6] Such tests are normally described as establishing scale structure. Acceptability with proportional modifiers, upper endpoint-oriented modifiers or lower endpoint-oriented modifiers provides evidence that the associated scale is, respectively, totally closed, upper-closed or lower-closed. For simplicity, modifier tests may be framed in terms of standard type, due to the correlation between scale structure and standard type (see note 4).

[7] In applying both tests, we need to focus on strict truth conditions, rather than on ways of understanding gradable adjectives that might be available in some contexts. For instance, (4b) might sound acceptable because we are understanding it as equivalent to 'Half of the teaspoon is (completely) clean' (see *quantified construals* in § 3.2). Similarly, it might seem that (5a) is compatible with the table's being clean if we imagine a loose use of 'clean' (see note 27).

(c) The teaspoon is (? half / ? most of the way / ? completely / ? perfectly / slightly / a little) dirty.

(d) Zoya is (? half / ? most of the way / ? completely / ? perfectly / ? slightly / ? a little) tall.

Entailment tests provide further information about standard type. If a comparative construction of the form '*x* is (more *F* / *F*-er) than *y*' entails that *x* is *F*, this shows that the adjective is *minimum-standard*. If it entails that *y* is not *F*, this shows that the adjective is *maximum-standard*. If neither entailment holds, this indicates that the adjective is *relative*. The following patterns emerge for maximum-standard 'clean', minimum-standard 'open', and relative 'tall':

(5) (a) The floor is cleaner than the table. $\not\Rightarrow$ The floor is clean. $\Rightarrow$ The table is not clean.

(b) The window is more open than the door. $\Rightarrow$ The window is open. $\not\Rightarrow$ The door is not open.

(c) Zoya is taller than Zain. $\not\Rightarrow$ Zoya is tall. $\not\Rightarrow$ Zain is not tall.

What is the verdict of these tests for 'true'? Some in the recent literature have argued that 'true' is an absolute gradable adjective. First, it appears to accept a variety of degree modifiers:

(6) (a) That is (very / completely / perfectly / partly / slightly / to some extent / almost / half) true. (Égré 2021)

(b) What Paul said is (a bit / a little / halfway / completely / mostly) true. (Henderson 2021)

Second, 'true' can apparently occur in comparative constructions:

(7) (a) It is more true to say that our opinions depend upon our lives and habits, than to say that our lives and habits depend on our opinions. (Égré 2021, p. 31)

(b) What Tom said was more true than what Jerry said. (Henderson 2021, p. 758)

(c) Newtonian mechanics is less true than relativistic mechanics. (Henderson 2021, p. 758)

Égré and Henderson argue that the acceptability of 'true' with these degree phrases shows that it is an absolute gradable adjective. Recall that acceptability with all three groups of degree modifiers provides evidence that a gradable adjective is absolute, without indicating whether it is maximum-standard or minimum-standard absolute. Entailment tests can provide further information about standard type.

There have been no attempts to apply the entailment tests to comparative constructions with 'true'. Indeed, it is surprisingly difficult to apply them. For instance, it is unclear whether or not (7b) entails that what Tom said was true or that what Jerry said was not true. This is puzzling: if 'true' is an absolute gradable adjective, then why do the entailment tests fail to clearly classify it as any particular type of absolute gradable adjective?[8] One hypothesis would be that neither entailment holds, and that 'true' is actually a relative gradable adjective, in spite of the evidence of the modifier tests. I return to this puzzle in §3.3. Despite these open questions, it looks as if there is evidence that 'true' is some type of gradable adjective. Why does this matter?

2.3. 'True' as a gradable adjective

Recall the following widely held theses:

> *No gradation*: There is no graded truth property that truth-bearers can have to a greater or lesser degree.
>
> *No variation*: 'True' does not have a context-sensitive meaning: whether a truth-bearer counts as 'true' (under its literal meaning) does not depend on the context in which 'true' is used.

These theses are in direct conflict with the gradation and variation of gradable adjectives (see §2.1). First, if 'true' is a gradable adjective, then there must be a graded truth property that contributes to its meaning. Second, if 'true' is a relative gradable adjective, then it is context-sensitive.

[8] Henderson suggests that 'true' is maximum-standard absolute, whereas Égré claims that 'true' is ambiguous between a maximum-standard gradable adjective and a minimum-standard one. To the ear of an anonymous reviewer, (7b) clearly entails that what Jerry said was not true. If 'true' is a gradable adjective, then this would provide evidence that it is a maximum-standard one. Note that none of my key arguments will depend on entailment patterns' being unclear: clear entailment patterns would be compatible with 'true' being non-gradable (see note 23) and unclear entailment patterns would be compatible with its being gradable (see note 28).

Existing theories of truth tend to accept these theses.[9] *Deflationary accounts* hold that the role of the word 'true' is exhausted by all non-paradoxical instances of the schemas '"*s*" is true if and only if *s*' or '<*p*> is true if and only if *p*', for a sentence or utterance *s* or proposition *p* (Ramsey 1927; Quine 1970; Field 1986; Horwich 1998). According to such accounts, 'true' serves a purely expressive or logical function: disquotation or denominalization, and forming generalizations. For instance, to say that the sentence 'Zain is a cat' is true is equivalent to saying that Zain is a cat, so 'true' serves to remove the quotation marks; and to describe 'what Zoya said' or 'everything Zoya said' as 'true' is to generalize about truth-bearers that we otherwise might struggle to identify or list. Deflationary accounts are also often characterized as denying that 'true' attributes a substantive property to truth-bearers, although there is some disagreement about what makes a property 'substantive' (Edwards 2013; Wyatt 2016). *Inflationary accounts* claim that there is more to the meaning of 'true' than instances of the schemas, and that 'true' expresses a substantive truth property. Some inflationary accounts hold that there are multiple truth properties, associated with different types of truth-bearers (Wright 1992, 2001, 2013; Lynch 2001a, 2006, 2013, 2009; Kölbel 2013).

No existing deflationist accepts a graded truth property. Indeed, it is difficult to see how deflationism could be reconciled with such a property.[10] Instances of the schemas would need to be modified if there were degrees of truth. Presumably, they would have to be implicitly or explicitly equivalent to '"*s*" (<*p*>) is true if and only if "*s*" (<*p*>) is mapped to a point on the relevant scale that equals or exceeds degree *d*'. But then the role of the word 'true' would not be exhausted by instances of the traditional schemas. Deflationists might try to update their view to rely on instances of the *modified* schemas. Yet a theorist must say more about the role of 'true' than is given by instances of the modified schemas alone.

First, a theorist would need to specify whether the degree *d* in instances of the schemas is the maximum or minimum degree on

[9] The few theorists who have rejected the first thesis typically do so in order to provide a solution to the problems posed by vagueness; see Zadeh (1975), Edgington (1996), Smith (2008), Weatherson (2005). Hence degree theories of truth are not a recent invention, despite the recent focus on 'true' as a gradable adjective. The few theorists who have rejected the second thesis tend to do so in order to address the Liar paradox; see Burge (1979), Simmons (1993), Yu (2016).

[10] Henderson (2021) makes the stronger claim that deflationism is incompatible with a graded truth property.

the relevant scale, or a different degree in different contexts. So a crucial part of the theory would concern what structure the scale of degrees of truth has, and which degree on that scale marks the threshold for a truth-bearer's counting as 'true'. Second, instances of the modified schemas would not capture the expressive or logical role of 'true', as they neither disquote '*s*' nor denominalize <*p*>. One way that a theorist might try to explain why *p* follows from '<*p*> is true' (and likewise for *s* and '*s*') would be to claim that the degree *d* in each instance of the modified schemas is always the maximum degree of the scale, and that <*p*>'s being mapped to the maximum degree entails that *p*. However, this explanation appears to draw on resources external to instances of the schemas in capturing the role of 'true'. A third issue is that, if there are degrees of truth, then it should be possible to use language to compare or modify the degrees of truth attributed to truth-bearers. But then there would be felicitous uses of 'true'—say, in instances of '"s_1" (<p_1>) is more true than "s_2" (<p_2>)'—that go beyond a purely expressive or logical role and are not captured by instances of the modified schemas.

Deflationists might respond by accepting the instances of the modified schemas while rejecting the view that they exhaust the role of 'true'. They might then claim that the defining characteristic of deflationary accounts is simply the denial that 'true' attributes a substantive property. The question of whether such a version of deflationism could be compatible with a graded truth property depends on what is meant by 'substantive'. It seems that a graded truth property need not be substantive in the sense of grounding genuine similarities between its bearers (Asay 2014; Edwards 2018) or playing an explanatory role with respect to other phenomena (Williams 2001). A graded truth property might count as substantive due to the potential for a constitution theory of the form '*x* is true = *x* is *F*' (Horwich 1998, p. 143): the replacement of '*F*' with 'mapped to a point on the relevant scale that equals or exceeds degree *d*' might be thought to supply a reductive analysis of 'is true', at least if the relevant scale and degree *d* are identified. A graded truth property is likely to count as substantive by virtue of failing to be a merely logical property. For instance, a graded truth property would not be invariant under all *transformations* of the items to which it applies—ways of arbitrarily swapping each truth-bearer for another, in order to show that the property is indifferent to particular features of items (Tarski 1986; Wyatt 2016)—unless the transformations were restricted to ones that swap truth-bearers mapped to the same degree of truth; but it would then need to be

argued that this restriction respects an 'intrinsic structure' on truth-bearers rather than being an ad hoc strategy to secure logicality (MacFarlane 2000, §§6.4–6.8). Also, it does not seem that 'true' would be more similar to logical expressions like 'not' and 'every' than to non-logical ones like 'blue' (Damnjanovic 2010, pp. 46-7), because the degree-based semantics appear closer to those for the gradable adjective 'blue' than to those for logical operators or quantifier expressions.

In sum, it seems that those who accept a graded truth property would need to give up the view that 'true' serves a purely logical or expressive role exhausted by instances of the traditional or modified schemas. Yet deflationists may be reluctant to characterize their position solely in terms of the rejection of a substantive truth property, especially in light of ongoing disagreement about how to define 'substantive'. Moreover, a graded truth property appears to count as substantive under some of these definitions.

Existing inflationary accounts typically reject graded truth properties. The properties that occurrences of 'true' are thought to express—empirical verifiability (James 1907), settlement at the end of investigation (Peirce 1878), coherence (Bradley 1914; Blanshard 1939), correspondence with reality (Russell 1912; Austin 1950), a primitive truth property that cannot be further analysed (Davidson 1996; Merricks 2007), and so on—are treated as non-graded. The question of whether inflationary accounts could be reconciled with graded truth properties depends on the property involved. It seems that the properties of being empirically verified, or settled on as the ultimate result of investigation, could not come in degrees.[11] The property of being consistent with or entailed by a collection of truth-bearers also appears to be an all-or-nothing matter; although some have suggested that coherence-making features may come in degrees (Lynch 2009, p. 167). Some candidates for correspondence relations appear to be non-graded, including structural equivalence between truth-bearers and facts, correlation of truth-bearers with situations of certain types,

[11] Howat (2015) questions whether Peirce's view should be classified as inflationist. He also claims that dictionaries list a definition of 'true' as accuracy that comes in degrees, and Peirce might have sometimes thought of truth in this way (Howat 2015, pp. 436-7). I suspect that these dictionary definitions involve a disambiguation of 'true' that does not express a property of truth-bearers (sentences, propositions, etc.). For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary mentions accuracy only under the definition 'In accordance with a standard, rule, or ideal', which includes examples solely concerning non-truth-bearers, such as 'A strip required to be cut and planed up perfectly true and even on its sides and ends' and 'The truest translation is the first'.

and reference of expressions to objects. Other candidates for correspondence relations might more easily be thought to come in degrees, such as resemblance between truth-bearers and the world (Henderson 2021). A primitive truth property might be graded, although no further characterization of this property would be possible. Still, even those inflationists who rely on properties that could be treated as graded are unlikely to want to give up the no gradation thesis; for this would be to reject Wright's 'platitude' that 'there is, strictly, no such thing as a proposition's being more or less true' (1998, p. 60), which most inflationists accept as a constraint on theories of truth.

Theories that admit *gaps* and *gluts*—respectively, truth-bearers that are neither true nor false and those that are both true and false—also tend to accept that there is no gradation, although perhaps versions of such theories could be developed that invoke a graded truth property. For a gap or glut does not have less truth than a true truth-bearer or more truth than a false truth-bearer. Rather, the natural interpretation is that a gap lacks the property of being true, whereas a glut has the property of being true.

The thesis that there is no variation is likewise endorsed by virtually every existing account (for the few exceptions, see note 9 above). To be clear, the thesis allows the context to affect whether a sentence is associated with a truth-bearer that counts as 'true'. Occurrences of 'I am walking' at different contexts will be associated with different truth-bearers, only some of which will end up in the semantic value of occurrences of 'true'. Yet the thesis states that once an occurrence of 'I am walking' has been linked to a particular truth-bearer—say, the proposition that the speaker at context c is walking at the time of c—then whether this truth-bearer counts as 'true' at a world does not depend on the context of utterance of 'true'. If it is actually true that the speaker at c is walking at the time of c, then this proposition will be in the semantic value of 'true' at the actual world when 'true' is used at *any* context.

Advocates of most existing accounts, along with anyone who thinks that there is no gradation and no variation, therefore face a problem: either they relinquish some of their core views about 'true' and truth, or they deny that 'true' is a gradable adjective. In light of the linguistic evidence described in §2.2, the latter strategy might appear hopeless. Still, I will pursue this strategy in the remainder of the paper.

3. The case against gradable 'true'

3.1. Merely apparent gradability

On the face of it, the thesis that 'true' is a gradable adjective is compelling: 'true' behaves like an absolute gradable adjective with respect to the types of degree modifiers it accepts, and it can appear in comparative constructions. Yet in §2.1, it was never claimed that the potential for an expression to sometimes occur with degree phrases entails that its meaning involves a graded property. It was only claimed that an adjective's having a meaning that involves a graded property predicts its acceptability with degree phrases. It might seem as if evidence related to degree phrases obviously entails the gradability of an adjective; for how can we make claims comparing or modifying the degree of the property expressed by an adjective if that property does not come in degrees? Yet it turns out that non-gradable adjectives sometimes admit degree phrases.

The expressions 'pregnant' and 'hexagonal' are paradigm examples of non-gradable adjectives. The intuition that there is no gradation is particularly clear for the meanings of these expressions: the property of being pregnant or hexagonal does not come in degrees. Still, (8a)–(9c) are acceptable in some contexts.

(8) (a) Sarah is more pregnant than Sue; Sarah is showing more. (Burnett 2017, p. 96)

(b) Mary is slightly pregnant; she's showing, but not very much. (Burnett 2017, p. 112)

(c) She's too pregnant to board a long-haul flight.

(9) (a) European countries are more hexagonal than African countries.

(b) France is almost hexagonal. (Burnett 2017, p. 112)

(c) France is very hexagonal, for a country. (Burnett 2017, p. 44)

Hence non-gradable adjectives—that is, those that express non-graded properties under their ordinary interpretation—can sometimes occur with degree phrases. This is despite the absence of an obvious graded property to contribute to comparisons and degree modifications. We will return to the question of how to explain

such occurrences in §3.2. For now, the important question is how to determine whether an adjective is genuinely gradable.

Lassiter (2017, p. 138) briefly suggests a strategy for checking whether an abstract noun expresses a graded property. First, one forms a sentence where the noun is the subject or object of the verb 'increase'. Next, one judges whether that sentence seems felicitous relative to some everyday context where the noun receives its ordinary interpretation. The rationale behind this strategy is clear: only a graded property can felicitously be said to increase. For instance, (10a) seems felicitous whereas (10b) does not.

(10) (a) Her height increased over the summer.

(b) ? Her pregnancy increased over the summer.

To adapt Lassiter's strategy into a test for adjectives, one need only identify an abstract noun lexically related to the target adjective. Whether the noun is felicitous with 'increase' provides evidence about whether the related adjective is genuinely gradable, by indicating whether a graded property is available to contribute to the meaning of that adjective. Then, (10a) and (10b) provide evidence that 'tall' is a gradable adjective whereas 'pregnant' is not.

A second strategy for checking whether an adjective is genuinely gradable draws on empirical data about how frequently or naturally it combines with degree phrases. The rationale is that an adjective is of the right semantic type to combine with degree phrases if and only if its meaning involves a graded property. Hence combining degree phrases with genuine gradable adjectives should be easy, whereas occurrences of degree phrases with non-gradable adjectives will involve a more complex or unusual process. For instance, Klecha (2014, pp. 39–47) discusses corpus data where the proportion of occurrences of 'small' and 'pregnant' in the unmodified form—as opposed to with degree phrases—were, respectively, 43% and over 99%. The fact that the corpus contains comparatively many occurrences of 'small' with degree phrases, and virtually no such occurrences of 'pregnant', provides evidence that the former should be classified as a gradable adjective and the latter as a non-gradable one.

Perhaps these tests only ever provide defeasible evidence about gradability. Still, we might ask about their verdicts for 'true'. Lassiter gives 'truth' as an example of a noun that *fails* to express a

graded property, due to the infelicity he attributes to (11a). (11b) provides further apparently infelicitous examples.[12]

(11) (a) ? She increased the deposition's truth by saying more. (Lassiter 2017, p. 138)

(b) ? The truth of the (sentence / proposition / utterance / claim / judgement / prediction / conclusion) increased (over time / the more we considered it).

Moreover, analyses of the Corpus of Contemporary American English indicate that 'true' is used very infrequently with degree phrases: Klecha (2014) reports that 96% of occurrences were in the unmodified form.[13] Perhaps, then, 'true' is *not* a genuine gradable adjective.

3.2. Explaining merely apparent gradability

To defend the view that 'true' is a non-gradable adjective, we must explain how it can appear acceptable with degree phrases, such as in (6a)–(7c). We have already seen that paradigm non-gradable adjectives like 'pregnant' and 'hexagonal' sometimes occur with degree

[12] It is important to judge these sentences by considering their literal interpretations—*truth* has increased—rather than charitable reinterpretations where the speaker means that something else (for instance, aptness, epistemic confidence or proximity to being true) has increased. Lassiter seems to think that 'truth' is *clearly* infelicitous when interpreted in this way. For those whose judgements are not as clear-cut, it should at least be clear that 'truth' sounds less natural with 'increase' than 'height' and 'cleanliness' do. Also, an anonymous reviewer suggests that Lassiter's test might track something to do with event structure, rather than gradation of properties. A useful observation here is that (11b) sounds more natural if we replace 'truth' with nouns that are better candidates for expressing graded properties of truth-bearers, such as 'importance' or 'plausibility'. This minimal change should not affect event structure, which is generally determined by the verb phrase (Pustejovsky 1991). So it looks as if the infelicity of (11b) is attributable to the meaning of 'truth', and that Lassiter's test does track a feature of the meanings of nouns.

[13] Klecha (2014, pp. 39–47) ran a 'cluster analysis' (a statistical method for establishing natural groupings) that divided adjectives into two clusters based on the proportion of their occurrences in the unmodified form. The first cluster included paradigm gradable adjectives, such as 'small', 'dangerous' and 'healthy'. The second included paradigm non-gradable adjectives like 'pregnant', along with 'true'. The second cluster also included a few paradigm gradable adjectives, such as 'safe', 'open' and 'full', albeit with lower proportions of unmodified uses than paradigm non-gradable adjectives or 'true'. Klecha concludes that the two clusters respectively consist of 'the expressions which occur very frequently with degree modifiers, which we can thus be sure are gradable just from frequency of attestation, and the expressions which occur less frequently with degree modifiers, which we therefore cannot be sure about, purely on the basis of frequency of attestation' (2014, p. 47). So the cluster analysis at least shows that 'true' is not among the adjectives that we can be confident are gradable.

phrases. A useful first step is to reflect on how hearers make sense of occurrences of sentences like (8a)–(9c). For instance, an occurrence of (9a) might be understood in any of the following ways:

(9a) European countries are more hexagonal than African countries.

⇝ *European countries are closer to being hexagonal than African countries.*

⇝ *More European countries than African countries are hexagonal.*

⇝ *It is more apt to say that European countries are hexagonal than to say that African countries are hexagonal.*

While the literature on gradable adjectives lacks a systematic account of the interpretation of non-gradable adjectives with degree phrases, three phenomena are often mentioned:[14]

(i) *Coerced*: The occurrence of the adjective is understood to provide some scale that does not contribute to its ordinary meaning.

(ii) *Quantified*: The adjective's nominal arguments are understood to provide a domain of individuals or parts.

(iii) *Metalinguistic*: A scale that measures aptness of expressions or content is contextually supplied.

Each of these phenomena involves a different type of mechanism that causes a scale or domain to become available. The degree phrase is then interpreted relative to that scale or domain.

In more detail, *coercion* is a general phenomenon where an expression appears to cause another expression to have a different meaning from its ordinary one, because the ordinary meaning is of the wrong type to allow the expressions to combine.[15] Attempting to

[14] For discussions of coerced understandings, see Bogal-Allbritten (2012), Klecha (2014, p. 33), Lassiter (2017, p. 91). For quantified construals, see Frazier, Clifton and Stolterfoht (2008, pp. 315–16), Kennedy and McNally (2005, pp. 365–6), Moltmann (1997, p. 188). For metalinguistic construals, see Morzycki (2011), Giannakidou and Yoon (2011).

[15] See Pylkkänen and McElree (2006). For instance, the verb 'finish' requires its argument to be a verb phrase that refers to an event (for example, 'reading the book'). When it occurs with a noun phrase argument that does not ordinarily refer to an event (for example, 'Zoya finished the book'), 'finish' coerces the noun phrase into contributing an associated event.

combine a degree phrase with an expression that has the wrong type of meaning—say, a non-gradable adjective—might therefore cause that expression to be associated with a scale. This can happen only at contexts where hearers are able to recover a scale related to the ordinary meaning of the non-gradable adjective. Coercion could never cause 'hexagonal' to be associated with a scale of degrees of height.

One natural scale that can often be associated with a non-gradable adjective consists of degrees of *proximity to* attaining the non-graded property, or *distance from* having attained it.[16] In the former case, only an item mapped to the maximum degree of the scale has the non-graded property, and in the latter case, an item mapped to the minimum degree (along with any higher degree) has the non-graded property. For example, it is often natural to associate 'hexagonal' with a scale that measures things' (resemblance-based) proximity *to* being hexagonal, and to associate 'pregnant' with a scale that measures pregnant individuals' (temporal) distance *from* impregnation.

Another scale that can be associated with certain non-gradable adjectives measures the *aptness* of expressions or content.[17] A non-gradable adjective can be coerced into association with this scale only if its ordinary meaning is similar to that of words that measure aptness. If 'true' is a non-gradable adjective, then—in contrast with 'pregnant' and 'hexagonal'—it would meet this condition: like 'apt', its meaning involves properties of sentences or truth-bearers, and its use normally conveys a speaker's endorsement of content.

Next, the degree phrase might be understood as a *quantifier* relative to individuals or parts supplied by the meaning of the adjective's nominal arguments.[18] This is possible even for gradable adjectives, as illustrated by the natural understanding of (12):

[16] See Recanati (2010, p. 68) and Hawthorne and Logins (2021, 1852–3) for similar observations regarding scales 'approximating' or 'of closeness to' a non-graded property.

[17] Plausibly, this is the same scale that is used to interpret metalinguistic construals (see below). In contrast with metalinguistic comparatives, coercion of the adjective would prevent its ordinary meaning from contributing to the construal arrived at. For instance, coerced association with a scale that measures aptness would cause 'It is very true that Zoya is tall' to be understood as equivalent to 'It is very apt to say that Zoya is tall'.

[18] That is, an occurrence of a sentence is understood like one where a determiner related to the degree phrase applies to a nominal. This is possible because there is a determiner with a related meaning for each proportional modifier, and for some upper and lower endpoint-oriented ones ('completely', 'totally', 'fully', 'a little'): 'half of the', '*n* per cent of the', 'most (of the)', 'all (of the)', 'part of the', 'some (of the)', '(a) few (of the)', and so on. The comparative

(12) The baby's face is completely hot. (Kennedy and McNally 2005, p. 366)

⇝ *All of the parts of the baby's face are hot.*

A quantified construal is available only with a suitable degree phrase (see note 18); a degree modifier like 'very', 'almost' or 'perfectly' cannot be matched with a quantifier. The availability also depends on whether the meaning of the nominal argument provides a bounded domain of individuals or parts: unlike (12), (13) cannot be understood as quantified.

(13) ? Outside it's completely hot. (Kennedy and McNally 2005, p. 366)

Finally, *metalinguistic* construals arise when an occurrence of 'more than', 'less than' or 'as much as' compares the aptness of expressions or content. Unlike ordinary comparatives, metalinguistic comparatives are not possible with the comparative morpheme '-er', and the overt argument of 'than' can consist of an adjective alone. For instance, (14a) is a paradigm example of a metalinguistic comparative, whereas (14b) sounds marked and does not allow metalinguistic construals:

(14) (a) George is more dumb than crazy.

⇝ *It is more apt to say that George is dumb than to say that George is crazy.*

(b) ? George is dumber than crazy. (Morzycki 2011, p. 41)

A scale that measures aptness—perhaps via degrees of imprecision (Morzycki 2011) or of preference (Giannakidou and Yoon 2011)—is supplied by the context rather than by any overt expression in the sentence.

With these three phenomena in hand, we may mount a defence of the view that 'true' is a non-gradable adjective.

construction formed with 'more' corresponds to the determiner 'more (of the) … than (of the)', which has a version that applies to one nominal argument (as in 'more windows are open than closed') and a version that applies to two nominals (as in 'more windows than doors are open'; see Beghelli 1994).

3.3. No gradation for 'true'

I propose that every case where 'true' acceptably occurs with a degree phrase can be explained via one of the three phenomena described in §3.2. For instance, an occurrence of (7b) might be understood as, respectively, coerced relative to a scale that measures proximity to truth, coerced relative to a scale that measures aptness, quantified, or metalinguistic:[19]

(7b) What Tom said was more true than what Jerry said.

⇝ *What Tom said was closer to being true than what Jerry said.*

⇝ *What Tom said was more apt than what Jerry said.*

⇝ *More of what Tom said than what Jerry said was true.*

⇝ *It is more apt to say that what Tom said was true than to say that what Jerry said was true.*

The coerced understandings above will be natural in some contexts. A quantified understanding is natural when 'what (Tom / Jerry) said' picks out multiple truth-bearers. A metalinguistic construal will often be available too.[20]

Other sentences with 'true' might support fewer construals. Coerced understandings are possible whenever the context allows 'true' to be associated with a suitable scale.[21] Whether a sentence allows a quantified understanding depends on the degree phrase and the nominal argument. For instance, 'That is partly true' may be understood as quantified if 'that' picks out something that renders multiple truth-bearers available, whereas 'That is perfectly true' can

[19] Haack (1980, p. 14) gives a number of similar paraphrases of occurrences of 'true' with degree modifiers, and defends the coherence of a scale of proximity to truth. Unger (1975, p. 297) also suggests that comparatives with 'true' are naturally understood to compare degrees of proximity to truth.

[20] A comparative that more clearly supports the metalinguistic construal (while also allowing a quantified construal) is 'What Zoya said is more true than false'.

[21] While scales measuring proximity to truth or aptness will often be natural, further scales related to the ordinary meaning of 'true' may be available. For instance, Horwich (1998, pp. 83–4) implies that a sentence like (7b) might be understood as equivalent to 'The probability that what Tom said was true exceeds the probability that what Jerry said was true', which suggests coerced association with a scale that measures the probability that an item is true.

never be understood as quantified. Non-comparatives cannot be understood as metalinguistic.[22]

We may now return to the puzzle of why the entailment tests do not clearly classify 'true' as maximum-standard or minimum-standard absolute (see §2.2). A plausible explanation is that 'true' is not a gradable adjective in the first place. When a non-gradable adjective occurs with a degree phrase, contextual features partially determine the most natural construal. To apply entailment tests, an assessor must interpret an out-of-context sentence. Without rich

[22] To illustrate further, I describe which construals are natural for some of the corpus examples provided by Henderson (2021, pp. 758–9) and Égré (2021, p. 31):

(i) (The author is discussing the fact that high numbers of tourists are visiting the attraction called 'the Twelve Apostles', and there were particularly high numbers of visitors on Christmas Day.)
And while I'm a little dubious about the reported suggestion that many of the visitors were locals—if it's even a little true and Victorians have to head to the 12 Apostles on *Christmas Day* to attempt to avoid crowds—then even that underlines the problem.
⇝ ***Coerced relative to an aptness scale****: if the suggestion that many of the visitors were locals is even a little apt (that is, relative to imprecise standards for 'many', such as when it is understood as 'some of the visitors' or 'many of the visitors that the reporter saw').*
⇝ ***Quantified:*** *if that even a few of the visitors were locals is true.*

(ii) (The author is reviewing the second episode of *Timeless*, and deems it better than the first episode but still quite bad.)
Timeless isn't boring, thank the lord. And better still, it doesn't take itself too seriously. If that sounds like damning with faint praise, that's a little bit true.
⇝ ***Coerced relative to an aptness scale****: the description (of the claim that* Timeless *isn't boring and doesn't take itself too seriously) as 'damning with faint praise' is a little bit apt (that is, it is not completely apt because the episode is still being praised as better than the first episode).*

(iii) The demand for universal health coverage might gain political force if so many of the uninsured were not non-citizens and non-voters. None of this is immigrants' fault, obviously. It is more true that America's tendency to plutocracy explains immigration policies than that immigration policies explain the tendency to plutocracy.
⇝ ***Coerced relative to a proximity-to-truth scale****: It is closer to being true that America's tendency to plutocracy explains immigration policies than that immigration policies explain the tendency to plutocracy.*
⇝ ***Metalinguistic:*** *It is more apt to say that it is true that America's tendency to plutocracy explains immigration policies than that it is true that immigration policies explain the tendency to plutocracy.*

(iv) Mr Speaker, what was true on day one is even more true now and that is that Canadians no longer trust the Conservatives to protect the environment.
⇝ ***Quantified:*** *That (many/most) Canadians no longer trust the Conservatives was true on day one and that even more Canadians (than before) no longer trust the Conservatives is true now.*

contextual features, the assessor might be unable to identify a unique way of understanding the sentence. She might even switch between distinct construals, possibly without being aware that she is doing so. Moreover, different ways of understanding the sentence will yield different entailment patterns.

Consider (7b). A coerced understanding involving a scale that measures proximity to truth will entail that what Jerry said was not true. A quantified construal will entail that *some* of what Tom said was true, but it is unclear whether this is sufficient for 'what Tom said' to be described as 'true'. A metalinguistic construal will have no relevant entailments, although it will give rise to the implicature that what Tom said was true (see Morzycki 2011, p. 43). Given the difficulty of settling on a unique construal, and of establishing exactly what follows from each construal, it is unsurprising if entailment patterns are unclear for non-gradable adjectives like 'true'.[23]

While the thesis that 'true' is a gradable adjective initially seemed compelling, I have argued that a closer look at the linguistic evidence supports the opposite conclusion. If one accepts these arguments, then the widely held theses that there is no gradation and that there is no variation may be upheld.

3.4. Preliminary objections

At this point, someone who thinks that 'true' is genuinely gradable might register a few objections. First, it might be observed that we could give similar paraphrases of occurrences of sentences with paradigm gradable adjectives. For instance, 'The windows are more open than the doors' could sometimes be understood as quantified ('More of the windows than the doors are open') or metalinguistic ('It is more apt to say that the windows are open than to say that the doors are open'). Yet it would not follow that 'open' fails to be a genuine gradable adjective. Why, then, should the potential to give paraphrases that do not require 'true' to be gradable indicate that 'true' is non-gradable?

The difference is that there is independent evidence that paradigm gradable adjectives are gradable. While some occurrences of sentences with gradable adjectives might be understood as quantified or metalinguistic, the availability of a lexically associated scale means that

[23] Of course, entailment patterns might seem clear if one way of understanding a comparative is particularly prominent for an assessor or context, and that understanding yields clear entailment patterns.

there is generally no pressure to seek an understanding distinct from the ordinary meaning. Yet remember that tests based on acceptability with 'increase' and corpus data raised doubts about the gradability of 'true'. The previous subsection gave an alternative explanation of the occurrences of 'true' with degree phrases that originally motivated classifying it as gradable. It is not the availability of this alternative explanation that indicates that 'true' is non-gradable. Rather, it is the fact that we have some evidence that 'true' is non-gradable without any good evidence that it is gradable.

Second, someone who thinks that 'true' is genuinely gradable might challenge the opponent of this view to explain why 'true' acceptably occurs with degree phrases more frequently than paradigm non-gradable adjectives like 'pregnant'. A response begins by pointing out that distinct non-gradable adjectives—and, indeed, distinct gradable adjectives—differ with respect to how often they are used with degree phrases. Klecha (2014, p. 43) reports that in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the proportion of occurrences in the unmodified form is 93% for 'real' and 'certain', 94% for 'perfect', 96% for 'true', 98% for 'impossible', 99% for 'dead' and 'unable', and over 99% for 'pregnant'. The frequency with which a non-gradable adjective is used with a degree phrase depends on the ease with which a coerced, quantified or metalinguistic understanding can be brought about. For instance, 'true' often applies to an argument that supplies a domain suitable for a quantified understanding (for instance, 'what Zoya said', 'those statements'), whereas 'unable' and 'pregnant' might apply to such types of arguments less frequently. At any rate, someone who thinks that 'true' is *non*-gradable could pose a similar challenge: if 'true' is genuinely gradable, then why does it acceptably occur with degree phrases so much *less* frequently than paradigm gradable adjectives?[24]

Finally, my proposal might be accused of being ad hoc: acceptable occurrences of 'true' with degree phrases are explained in three distinct ways rather than via a single unified phenomenon. However, a central thesis of my proposal is that there is no unified phenomenon. When someone uses a non-gradable adjective with a degree phrase, hearers can employ a number of strategies to try to reconstruct some meaningful content that the speaker intended to convey. To provide a

[24] Lassiter (2017, p. 142) considers a parallel objection to his view that 'possible' is a gradable adjective. The explanation that he suggests—that 'possible' shares a scale with 'likely', and that the latter is preferred with degree phrases—could not be extended to 'true'.

single explanation of all occurrences of 'true' with degree phrases would be to overlook this fact.

3.5. No variation for 'true'

My arguments that 'true' is a non-gradable adjective, and my responses to the most pressing objections, have now been given. Suppose that one rejects my arguments, and maintains that 'true' is a gradable adjective. Perhaps one thinks there are additional criteria for distinguishing between gradable and non-gradable adjectives that favour this view.[25] Alternatively, one might think that there is no sharp distinction between gradable and non-gradable adjectives.[26] To grant that 'true' is a gradable adjective would be to reject the thesis of no gradation. Yet I now argue that there would remain grounds for upholding the thesis of no variation.

[25] It is difficult to come up with any criteria additional to those discussed in §3.1. Égré (2021, p. 25) argues that the modifiers 'not completely', 'to some extent' and 'partly' are unacceptable with paradigm non-gradable adjectives but acceptable with 'true'. However, contra Égré's judgement, it is not too difficult to provide (coerced or quantified) examples where paradigm non-gradable adjectives occur with these modifiers:

(i) France is hexagonal to some extent.
(ii) The crystals were (partly / not completely) hexagonal.

Henderson (2021, p. 771) claims that, when degree modifiers apply to non-gradable adjectives to produce coerced interpretations, the modifiers tend to be italicized or vocally emphasized in order to indicate their markedness. He claims that modifiers are frequently applied to 'true' without being emphasized in this way. However, the natural way of reading (i) and (ii) does not seem to require emphasis on their modifiers; although one anonymous reviewer does note a preference for reading them with emphasis, and suggests that empirical data would be useful for settling this issue. Another reviewer points out that inferences involving 'true' and 'false' behave as one would expect if the adjectives were gradable: 'B is more false than A' seems to follow from 'A is more true than B', and gradable lexical antonyms license such inferences because they are interpreted relative to scales with the same dimension but the opposite ordering relation. However, relative to a given context, non-gradable lexical antonyms seem to be coerced into association with scales that also differ only with respect to the ordering relation. For instance, at a context where 'true' was coerced into association with a scale that measures proximity *to* being true (such that only items mapped to the maximum degree are true), 'false' would be coerced into association with a scale that measures distance *from* being true (such that items mapped to any non-zero degree are false). This suggests that the same inferences would be licensed at a context whether the antonyms were gradable or non-gradable but coerced. Hence neither acceptability with certain modifiers, emphasis on modifiers nor inferences with antonyms appears to provide a reliable criterion for genuine gradability.

[26] While the dominant view is that gradable and non-gradable adjectives are distinct types of lexical items with different types of meanings, Burnett (2017, p. 95) claims that the differences between them are 'purely pragmatic: at the level of their semantic denotations, they are identical'.

As stated in §2.1, relative gradable adjectives are context-sensitive: the covert standard associated with the unmodified form specifies different degrees in different contexts. Hence Zoya might count as 'tall' in some contexts in which 'tall' is used but not in others. If 'true' were a relative gradable adjective, then the thesis of no variation could not be upheld. For whether a truth-bearer counts as 'true' would depend on whether it is mapped to a degree that exceeds the one fixed by the context-sensitive standard. Hence a truth-bearer with a non-zero but non-maximum degree of truth might count as 'true' in some contexts in which 'true' is used but not in others.

However, the dominant view in the literature denies that *absolute* gradable adjectives are context-sensitive. For the standard associated with the unmodified form always specifies either the maximum or the minimum degree on the relevant scale. A cup that contains no liquid will count as 'empty' at every context, and a cup that contains some liquid will never strictly count as 'empty'. While absolute adjectives sometimes allow loose or imprecise uses, empirical evidence indicates that this is due to a general pragmatic process, not a context-sensitive standard in the semantics.[27]

Recall that the modifier tests initially motivated classifying 'true' as an *absolute* gradable adjective: it appears no harder to combine it with proportional, upper endpoint-oriented and lower endpoint-oriented modifiers ('half', 'completely', 'slightly') than with other degree modifiers ('very', 'to some extent'). The unclear entailment patterns prompted the hypothesis that 'true' is instead a *relative* gradable adjective. Arguably, it is easier to reconcile the unclear entailment patterns with the view that 'true' is absolute than it is to reconcile the acceptability of the modifiers with the view that it is relative. For it is not the case that a sentence like 'What Zoya said was more true than what Zain said' *clearly* entails *neither* that what Zoya said was true *nor* that what Zain said was not true; the point was that it is unclear whether it entails one of these claims or neither of them. Hence the entailment tests provide no more evidence of 'true' being relative than

[27] The dominant analysis holds that occurrences of sentences where absolute gradable adjectives are used loosely—say, an occurrence of 'The cup is empty' when the cup contains a few drops of liquid—express false propositions, but contexts that have reduced expectations of precision can make them felicitous for practical purposes (Kennedy and McNally 2005, p. 357). While some alternative analyses have been given (Rotstein and Winter 2004; Toledo and Sassoon 2011; Burnett 2017), empirical evidence of processing asymmetries between relative and absolute gradable adjectives suggest that only the former exhibit semantic context-sensitivity (Syrett, Kennedy and Lidz 2010; Aparicio, Xiang and Kennedy 2016).

of its being absolute.[28] If 'true' is a gradable adjective, then it is likely to be an *absolute* gradable adjective, and thus *not* context-sensitive.

So even those who remain convinced of the gradability of 'true' may uphold the thesis that there is no variation. A plausible argument then proposes that this thesis, as opposed to the thesis that there is no gradation, is the important one. An intuition underlying both theses is that the meaning of 'true' is in some sense absolute. Yet if 'true' were a *maximum-standard* absolute gradable adjective, then only truth-bearers that are mapped to the maximum degree of truth would strictly count as 'true'.[29] Speakers would be able to ignore the gradation of the truth property unless a degree phrase forces them to consider degrees other than the maximum. Given the comparative rarity of occurrences of 'true' with degree phrases, speakers would be able to ignore the gradation of the truth property most of the time. This would explain why the thesis that there is no gradation is so widely held: while there would be a truth property that truth-bearers can have to a greater or lesser degree, speakers would normally only be aware of the maximum degree.

In sum, even if we accept the results of the tests discussed in §2.1, and reject the arguments against the gradability of 'true' provided in §§3.1–3.3, it would only follow that 'true' is an *absolute* gradable adjective. Then the thesis that there is no variation—which appears to capture ideas that motivate both theses—could be upheld. The rejection of the no gradation thesis would be difficult to reconcile with

[28] Ideally, an advocate of the view that 'true' is an absolute gradable adjective should explain why the entailment tests do not clearly classify it as maximum- or minimum-standard. One option would be to follow Égré (2021) in claiming that it is ambiguous between a maximum- and minimum-standard gradable adjective. Another option would be to adapt the explanation of the unclear entailment patterns proposed in §3.3. That is, it might be conceded that quantified and metalinguistic construals of comparative sentences with 'true' are often available, as they are even for paradigm gradable adjectives—see, for example, (12). It might then be claimed that assessors are apt to switch between considering the entailments of these potential construals and the entailment of the literal meaning to which gradable 'true' contributes. An advocate of this option would need to explain why quantified and metalinguistic construals are more prominent or distracting for comparatives formed with 'true' than for those formed with (say) 'open' or 'clean'.

[29] Those who think that 'true' is gradable might plausibly argue that it is acceptable under its *ordinary* interpretation only with *upper* endpoint-oriented modifiers, and is thus maximum-standard. For uses of 'true' with upper endpoint-oriented modifiers appear to be far more common than uses with lower endpoint-oriented ones: a search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English returns over 235 results for 'completely true' and 9 results for 'slightly true'. Indeed, the Corpus contains more occurrences of 'a little tall' and 'a little pregnant' than 'a little true'.

deflationary accounts of truth, for the reasons described in §2.3, but it would be compatible with at least some inflationary accounts. Of course, I think there are good arguments for accepting that 'true' is a non-gradable adjective. Accepting these arguments allows the no gradation thesis and no variation thesis *both* to be upheld.

4. Conclusion

A view of truth endorsed by virtually all existing theories initially appears to be threatened by the behaviour of the word 'true'. For occurrences of 'true' with degree phrases seem to provide evidence that it is a gradable adjective. If it is a gradable adjective, then there is a graded truth property and 'true' might be context-sensitive. I have argued that a closer look at the evidence indicates that 'true' is a non-gradable adjective. First, two tests that help to identify genuinely gradable adjectives—based on felicity with 'increase' and frequency of occurrences with degree modifiers—support the view that 'true' is non-gradable. Second, three phenomena provide plausible explanations of occurrences of 'true' with degree phrases: each occurrence is understood as coerced, quantified or metalinguistic. Even if one rejects my arguments and insists that 'true' is genuinely gradable, there remain good grounds for denying that it is context-sensitive. Hence a closer look at natural language turns out to rescue the common view of truth.[30]

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