DEGREE WORDS, INTENSIFICATION, AND WORD CLASS DISTINCTIONS IN ROMANCE LANGUAGES

Ventura Salazar-García
University of Jaén
vsalazar@ujaen.es

This work is focused on the grammatical status of degree words in Romance languages. The analysis procedure I use here is based on the Parts-of-Speech Typology, proposed by Hengeveld (1992) and Hengeveld et al. (2004). Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that I deal with concepts of flexibility, distinction, and rigidity, not as exclusive typological paths, but as (potentially) compatible grammatical strategies. At this stage in my research, the main remarks I want to put forward are the following:

a) The flexible strategy is manifested by the fact that, in many Romance languages, a root may be shared by a noun quantifier, a verb modifier expressing quantificational aspect, and, sometimes, a superlative degree word. Normally, but not always, it derives from the Latin item multum: Portuguese muito, Spanish mucho, Catalan molt (cf 1a, 1b), Italian molto, Romanian mult (but French beaucoup, with a different origin). These forms are characterized by a categorial ambiguity in the distinction between adjective and adverb.

(1) Catalan:
   a) El teu vestit m’agrada molt.
      ‘I like your dress a lot’
   b) El teu amic es molt agradós.
      ‘Your friend is very pleasant’

b) The aforementioned ambiguity is lessened by other grammatical factors (cf Anward, 2000). In particular, noun modifiers tend to differ from verb modifiers through morphosyntactic procedures: the inflectional morphology (cf 2), or the adoption of a partitive structure (cf 3). The distribution of such procedures is conditioned by certain properties of nouns; for instance, the opposition count/non-count.

(2) Spanish:
   Esta revista tiene muchas ilustraciones.
   ‘This magazine has many(feminine-plural) illustrations’

(3) French:
   Il y a beaucoup d’argent ici.
   ‘There is a lot of money here’

c) On the other hand, adverb and adjective modifiers (expressing degree) have a tendency to present specific forms denoting a distinguishing strategy. This fact may be due to a specific phonic evolution (cf. Spanish muy), or to the use of units that originally belonged to other word classes (cf. Romanian foarte; French très, fort; Spanish and French bien, etc.). Finally, some
languages mark the superlative content by means of an affix (Spanish –ísimo, Italian –issimo), which may be considered a kind of rigid strategy.

d) A strong polymorphism, which is probably not exclusive to Romance languages, can be observed. This implies that it is easy to find different means of codification for the same semantic content in a given language. I think that polymorphism might be explained as part of a more general notion of redundancy.

References