

About a metalinguistic degree suffix in Tundra Nenets

Synthesis. In Tundra Nenets (TN), an understudied and threatened Samoyedic language of the Uralic language family, the suffix *-rka* can be commonly found on the gradable adjectives in comparison constructions. Berezovskaya (2020) proposes that *-rka* in comparison constructions is a degree modifier that modifies the differential degree and states that the difference between the standard of comparison and the associate is small. Strikingly, this suffix can also be found cross-categorially, namely on nouns, verbs, basically all syntactic categories. In this talk, I propose an analysis of *-rka* with nouns where it is a degree modifier that marks a small difference between degrees of imprecision (in the spirit of Morzycki’s 2011 metalinguistic comparatives).

Data. This section provides cross-categorical data of *-rka* on nouns, verbs and adverbs.

***-rka* on nouns.** Examples can be found in the literature, for instance in Terezhenko (1947) in (1). In (8) on p. 3, I provide original data from my own fieldwork.

- (1) *puxuc’a* - old woman; *puxuc’arka* (‘less of an old woman’)
My consultants’ translation: ‘not a young woman, but also not an old woman yet’

What unites these examples is that when we add *-rka*, there is always a weakening, or attenuation taking place. For an inanimate object like ‘chair’ in (8-a), we get a kind of a chair, but not a prototypically ideal chair. With animate subjects like ‘mother’ in (8-b), which are often associated with certain typical properties, *-rka* subtracts some of the qualities ideally associated with a mother. This attenuation is reminiscent of Décsy’s (1966) description who classifies *-rka* as an adjectival suffix which can mark “**incompleteness of quantity**”. The closest translation of *-rka* on nouns in English is *sorta/kinda/kind of* for most cases.

***-rka* on verbs.** For completeness, I also provide examples of *-rka* on verbs in (2) and on p. 3 which are, however, not analyzed in this abstract.

- (2) a. *Man’a” biblioteka-xana ŋamd’u-rka-va”*.
We library-LOC. sit-RKA-2.PL.
‘We are sitting around a little in the library.’

What is common to all these examples? The suffix *-rka* coerces something non-gradable into something gradable, and then tells us that the property considered is not the full-fledged property of being a chair, for instance, (8-a). Thus, it always diminishes the quality or the amount or (with verbs) the time span under consideration by a certain degree.

Analysis. Theoretical Background. How exactly can we implement this data pattern in a formal semantic framework?

The answer can be found in a well-established line of research starting with Morzycki (2011) who analyzes metalinguistic comparatives such as ‘John is more dumb than crazy.’ by introducing **degrees of imprecision** that measure the halo size (Lasersohn 1999) of an expression¹. Following Morzycki (2011), whose key idea it is that metalinguistic comparatives compare imprecision and these ‘degrees of imprecision’ provide a means of ‘measuring’ halo size, Anderson (2013) analyzes the English *sorta* as a hedge that can modify verbs and nouns by making them conceptually gradable (by type-shifting and assigning a degree argument to a

¹According to Lasersohn, the pragmatic halo of an expression is a set of (semantic) objects of the same type as its denotation which differ in only “pragmatically ignorable” ways.

non-gradable predicate). He determines two different sources of gradability, the first one being inherent gradability of scalar adjectives, and the other one being coerced gradability derived from sets of alternatives. Bochnak & Csipak (2014) also propose an analysis of *...ish/-ish* using ideas from Morzycki (2011).

Analysis of *-rka* with nouns. I propose that *-rka* on nouns is a degree modifier and a halo widener. It has coercive powers when used with predicates without a gradable interpretation: if there is a non-gradable predicate, it forces a type shift via the operator *PREC*, cf. (3), (cf. Morzycki 2011) so that *-rka* can saturate a degree of precision argument.

$$(3) \quad \llbracket \text{PREC } \alpha \rrbracket^d = \lambda d'. \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{d'}$$

$$(4) \quad \text{PREC applied to } \textit{chair}: \\ \llbracket \text{PREC } \textit{chair} \rrbracket^d = \lambda d'. \llbracket \textit{chair} \rrbracket^{d'} = \lambda d'. \{f_{\langle e,t \rangle} : f \approx_{d',C} \mathbf{chair}\}$$

Anderson's *sorta* requires a degree to be close to the standard, while *...ish/-ish* requires a degree to be lower than the standard. In that respect, *-rka* is like *...ish/-ish*. With the help of *PREC*, our suffix *-rka* can apply to the new noun made gradable by *PREC* and return a property that holds of an individual to a degree that is close to, but is a little less than, the standard degree of precision for the noun. This is implemented by the context-sensitive predicate **small_C** which is true of a degree if it counts as 'small' in a given context.

The LF that serves as the input to interpretation of (8-a) is in (5). In (6), α is a predicate turned into a gradable property by *PREC*. **standard** is a function that is defined for standards associated with the degree of precision. It takes a function of type $\langle d, et \rangle$, a property that has been coerced into the type of gradable predicate by *PREC*, cf. (3). Crucially, *-rka* existentially quantifies over a degree slightly below the standard degree of precision. This lowers the degree of precision, but widens the pragmatic halo. Halos are modeled as sets of alternatives in Morzycki (2011). Our suffix picks a single alternative from the halo and applies it to the individual argument of *-rka*. In (7), we apply this semantics to the coerced noun *chair*. The degree argument of $\llbracket \text{PREC } \textit{chair} \rrbracket$ is saturated by d in (7-b) creating a set of alternatives. $\llbracket \text{PREC } \textit{chair} \rrbracket$ is substituted by the halo, i.e. the alternatives to *chair*. Examples of these alternatives are in (7-c).

$$(5) \quad \llbracket \text{NP-}rka \llbracket \text{NP } \text{PREC} \llbracket \text{NP } \textit{chair}_{\langle e,t \rangle} \rrbracket \rrbracket$$

$$(6) \quad \llbracket -rka \alpha \rrbracket^C = \lambda x. \exists d [\mathbf{small}_C(\llbracket \mathbf{standard}(\llbracket \text{PREC } \alpha \rrbracket) - d \rrbracket) \wedge \exists f : f \in \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket(d)[f(x)]]$$

$$(7) \quad \text{a. } \llbracket (5) \rrbracket^{d',C} = \lambda x. \exists d [\mathbf{small}_C(\llbracket \mathbf{standard}(\llbracket \text{PREC } \textit{chair} \rrbracket) - d \rrbracket) \wedge \exists f : f \in \llbracket \text{PREC } \textit{chair} \rrbracket(d)[f(x)]]$$

$$\text{b. } \llbracket (5) \rrbracket^{d',C} = \lambda x. \exists d [\mathbf{small}_C(\llbracket \mathbf{standard} - d \rrbracket \wedge \exists f : f \in \{f_{\langle e,t \rangle} : f \approx_{d,C} \mathbf{chair}\} [f(x)])]$$

$$\text{c. } \llbracket (5) \rrbracket^{d',C} = \lambda x. \exists d [\mathbf{small}_C(\llbracket \mathbf{standard} - d \rrbracket \wedge \exists f : f \in \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{chair}, \\ \textit{chair w/o a leg}, \\ \textit{tilted chair}, \\ \dots \end{array} \right\} [f(x)]]$$

Concluding remarks. At this point, it remains to be laid out what the exact semantic contribution of *-rka* is with verbs and adverbs and whether it can be given the same semantics as I propose for *-rka* with nouns. A promising route for an explanation is work on the Russian prefix *po-* (Filip 2000, Zinova 2016, Tatevosov 2020).

In this abstract, the enigma of *-rka* on nouns in TN is resolved providing us with an example of a morpheme that can force coerced gradability outside of domain of degree constructions. It is in good company with *sorta*, *-ish* and other hedges. TN thus complements the thus far anglo-centric picture with respect to metalinguistic degree morphemes and makes first steps towards a more complete cross-linguistic picture.

(8) **-rka on nouns:**

- a. *ŋamderc'* - chair, *ŋamderc'arka* - kind of a chair
- b. *neb'a* - mother, *neb'arka* - a mother who kind of fulfills her duties as a mother, but not quite;
ne - woman, *nerka* - kind of a woman (but does not behave like one in all relevant respects)
- c. *talej* - thief, *talejrka* - someone who has started being a thief, i.e. sort of a thief (he might have been spotted stealing once or so)
- d. *syra* - snow, *syrarka* - a light snow (as opposed to heavy snow)
- e. *sarmik* - a wolf, *sarmirka* - hard to tell whether it is a wolf or not a wolf, i.e. kind of a wolf, or maybe not
ŋano - a boat, *ŋanorka* - hard to tell whether it is a boat or not, i.e. sort of a boat

(9) **-rka on activity verbs:**

- a. *N'un'ah vyŋ-ana t'oryrŋa-rka.*
loon tundra-LOC. cry.3.SG-RKA
'The loon is crying in the tundra from time to time.'
- b. *Man' pis'a-rka-m.*
I laugh-RKA-1.Sg
'I laughed a little. = I chuckled.'
- c. *Olga tara-rka men'e-da.*
Olga dance-RKA like-3.SG
'Olga likes to dance occasionally/a little.'

(10) **-rka with degree achievements:**

- a. *Evej xanteve-rka.*
Soup cool-RKA
'The soup almost cooled down.'
- b. *T'eran tyry-rka-".*
Things dry-RKA-PL.
'The things have dried a little (= not completely).'

The example in (11) shows how **-rka** can even appear **on adverbs**. Here, the quality of running quickly is weakened to a shuffling (rather than running).

- (11) *Man' mera-rka s'urmbidamz'.*
I quickly-RKA ran
'I shuffled.'

Selected References. ANDERSON, K. (2013). "Inherent and coerced gradability across categories: manipulating pragmatic halos with *sorta*". *Proceedings of SALT 23*, 81–96. :: BEREZOVSKAYA, P. (2020). *Comparing Comparatives: New Perspectives from Fieldwork and Processing*, PhD thesis, University of Tübingen. :: BOCHNAK, R.M. & CSIPAK, E. (2014). "A new metalinguistic degree morpheme". *Proceedings of SALT 24*, 432–452. :: MORZYCKI, M. (2011). "Metalinguistic comparison in an alternative semantics for imprecision." *Natural Language Semantics* 19(1), 39–86.