Expressing aesthetic judgments in context

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Abstract. Aesthetic judgments are often expressed by means of predicates that, unlike 'beautiful' or 'ugly', are not primarily aesthetic, or even evaluative, such as 'intense' or 'harrowing'. This paper aims to explain how such adjectives can convey a value-judgment, and one, moreover, whose positive or negative valence depends on the context.

Keywords: Aesthetic adjectives; multidimensional adjectives; value-judgments; evaluative predicates; context-sensitivity; the semantics-pragmatics interface.

1   Ordinary adjectives in aesthetics: two puzzles, and a plan

Although we customarily talk of evaluative predicates, taking *good* and *bad* as their paradigms, and of aesthetic predicates, taking *beautiful* and *ugly* as their paradigms, it remains an open question whether either set of predicates constitutes a well-delineated class of natural language expressions. In aesthetic literature, the following have been considered to belong among aesthetic concepts: *unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, somber, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic, graceful, delicate, dainty, handsome, comely, elegant, garish, dumpy,* and *beautiful* (Sibley 1959: 421). However, it takes little to see that many among these adjectives have primary meanings that are not at all aesthetic. In a search performed with 'unified' in the British National Corpus, not a single among the 50 random hits was a case of an aesthetic use of 'unified'.[1] Similar observations may be made regarding

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1 One concern about 'unified' is that it formed from a past participle of a verb, so that many hits were actually instances of its use as verb rather than adjectives. Still, the typical uses appeared in the corpus are descriptive, e.g. "a unified system of penalties for smuggling people" (K5D 3070), "the implementation of

balanced, integrated, lifeless, dynamic, or *powerful*. The crucial observation, then, is that many adjectives whose primary meanings are not at all aesthetic may be *used* to express an aesthetic judgment. Similarly, many ordinary adjectives may be used to express a value-judgment: thus describing e.g. a proposal as "ambitious" will, in a suitable context, express a positive evaluation of the proposal at stake; but in another context, it may express a negative evaluation.

The question of what distinguishes adjectives that are lexically marked as aesthetic, such as *beautiful* and *ugly,* from the garden-variety of other adjectives that may be used in making aesthetic claims, such as *unified or lifeless*, remains a largely open question.[2] In this paper, I will work under the hypothesis that the former, but not the latter, have it built into their lexical meaning that their role is to assign a certain aesthetic value to the object or individual to which they are attributed. I will not argue for this hypothesis here. What is more, should the hypothesis turn out to be wrong, that would not affect the main points of the present paper. What I wish is to set aside the paradigmatic aesthetic adjectives, such as 'beautiful', and shift the discussion to ordinary adjectives as they are used in aesthetic discourse.

1.1.   The context-sensitivity of valence: two puzzles

I proceed under the assumption that many (perhaps most) aesthetic judgments and, more generally, value-judgments are expressed by means of vocabulary that is not primarily evaluative. Art critics seldom use adjectives like *good* and *beautiful* to express positive appreciations of works of art (or *bad* and *ugly* for the negative case). Although it would take a large amount of empirical work to properly demonstrate this claim, an informal survey of film reviews appears to support this assumption. It is from that survey that I am taking as my working examples the following excerpts of reviews of Haneke's *Amour,* Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road,* and Kormákur's *Everest*:[3]

1. *Amour* is harrowing, emotional, thrilling, intense, beautiful, tragic, and powerful cinema. (Blake Howard, Graffiti, 11 June 2012)

2. [*Mad Max: Fury Road*] is one of the most harrowing, intense, thrilling action movies of all time. It is absolutely epic. (Anders Wright, the San Diego Union Tribune, 14 May 2015)

3. The good news is the film is intense enough to numb the entire body. The bad news is that it's not emotionally deep enough to freeze the heart. [*Everest*] earns its fourth star because it's so harrowing and intense. (Jacob Hall, New York Daily News, 16 September 2015)

My focus will be on the adjectives 'harrowing' and 'intense', which have been used in all three reviews to express (or, as the case may be, *convey*) positive value judgments about the movies under considerations. (While (1) and (2) are extremely positive, (3), on a whole is lukewarm. Nevertheless, both 'harrowing' and 'intense' are used with a strongly positive valence.)

Natural though they are, these examples are also puzzling. The first puzzle is that 'harrowing' normally comes with a negative connotation; in general, when we perceive something (a situation, an event) as harrowing, we perceive it as bad. However, in this context, this normally negative adjective is used to convey a positive evaluation of the movie. Let us call this puzzle ***Valence-reversal***.[4] The second puzzle that these examples raise is that adjectives which do not systematically carry either a positive or a negative valence, such as 'intense', and which I will call *evaluatively neutral*, may acquire a valence in the context. How do they acquire their valence? Let us call this puzzle ***Valence-underspecification***.

1.2.   The plan

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explains two background notions that come from the semantics of adjectives: those of gradability and multidimensionality. These will be put to work, in section 3, to account for valence-underspecification. The idea, in a nutshell, is that adjectives such as 'intense' are multidimensional, and the dimensions relevant to their interpretation may vary from context to context. What is more, some of the dimensions may be positive and others negative. Thus in a context in which a positive dimension is salient, the statement in which 'intense' appears is likely to convey a positive evaluation as a whole; and *mutatis mutandis* for negative evaluations. Section 3 also addresses the question of what makes a given dimension count as positive, or "good", and, drawing on a number of examples, points out that this depends on the circumstances. This circumstance-sensitivity is then invoked to account for valence-reversal. The proposal put forward in section 3 leaves a number of issues open, two of which are tackled in section 4. One concerns the relationship between evaluatively neutral adjectives such as 'intense' and *thick terms*. The other is concerned with a more accurate understanding of the semantics of those adjectives, and explores the idea that these adjectives often entail implicit arguments, especially

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4 Later on, we will see other examples of negative adjectives that are used with positive valence. For the time being, let us note that 'harrowing' is not alone in this respect. In the context of movies and works of art, 'disturbing', 'shocking', 'insane', despite being normally negative, often give rise to positive evaluations.

experiencer and beneficiary arguments, which may interact with multidimensionality.

2   A snapshot at the semantics of 'intense'

One of the main aims of this paper is to explain how the valence of certain value-judgments expressed by means of evaluatively neutral adjectives, such as 'intense', can be determined with the help of the context. The solution to the puzzle of valence-underspecification that I am going to propose in section 3 is limited to those cases (which constitute a majority) in which the adjective at stake is *multidimensional*. The aim of this section is to introduce a couple of notions from the semantics of adjectives that will be put to work in addressing the puzzle. But before we go into those technicalities, I want to stress that valence-underspecification is a very widespread phenomenon. Situations in which the valence of the attitude expressed of conveyed crucially depends on the context are ubiquitous. Though this may be said to hold about all sorts of statements, here are some examples in which the evaluative aspects may be traced to the use of an evaluatively neutral adjective:

1.   What she did was audacious.
2.   Their project is ambitious.
3.   The plot of the movie is simple.
4.   Proust's sentences are meticulous.

It is an easy exercise to imagine pairs of contexts such that each of the above conveys a positive vs. a negative value-judgment. Note that adjectives such as 'audacious' are related to *thick concepts,* as discussed in metaethics, except that in discussion of thick concepts, the focus is on adjectives such as 'courageous' whose meaning is seen as encoding a positive valence, or adjectives such as 'cruel', seen as encoding a negative valence. I shall return to the connection in section 4.

2.1.   Gradability and multidimensionality

The adjectives that interest us here – 'intense', 'harrowing', the adjectives in examples 1 to 4 above – have two features that they share with many other adjectives, including the all-purpose evaluative adjectives 'good' and 'bad' and the aesthetic adjectives 'beautiful' and 'ugly': they are *gradable* and they are *multidimesnional*. Although gradability is a semantically complex feature, to which a large amount of literature has been devoted in linguistics (see Kamp (1975) or Klein (1980) for early references and Kennedy (2007) for a more recent and comprehensive study), there is an easy way to check whether an adjective is gradable, and it is to check whether it can be used in the comparative. Indeed, one can felicitously say that one movie is more intense than another, or that the plot of the one is simpler than that of the other. By

contrast, an adjective like '15 rated' is not gradable: a movie either is or is not 15 rated (that is, is such that no person under 15 is allowed to see it at the cinema or buy or rent it as a video), and it makes no sense to compare two 15 rated movie as to which one is "more so rated" than the other.

For a gradable adjective to truthfully apply to some individual, it is typically not enough that the property in question be held to just any degree; rather, it must be held to a degree that passes a certain *threshold*. Among theories of gradability, there are two main traditions. One has it that the context supplies a comparison class, and that the threshold is determined as a function of that comparison class (Kamp 1975, Klein 1980, McNally and Kennedy 2005). The other has it that the context supplies the threshold directly (Kennedy 2007). The pros and cons of the two traditions are not directly relevant to the issues that concern us here, hence I will assume the latter for simplicity. Note though that the fact that different speakers may appeal to different thresholds (or different comparison classes) can lead to disagreement about whether an adjective applies in a given case. For this reason, some linguists (e.g. Rett 2007) consider all gradable adjectives with context-sensitive threshold to be *evaluative*.[5] However, in line with the philosophical tradition, I shall use the term "evaluative" only when there is some *value-judgment* expressed or conveyed, where value-judgments may be understood as ascriptions of positive or negative value. The value ascribed need not be absolute: it can be relative to a scale (e.g. the scale of aesthetic value, moral value, emotional value, etc.), and it can also be relative in the sense that if I say, for example, that object x is better than object y, I don't ascribe any definite values to x or y, but I only situate their respective values relative to each other. Alternatively, Väyrynen (2013: 29) suggests that we understand evaluation as "information to the effect that something has a positive or negative standing – merit or demerit, worth or unworth – relative to a certain kind of standard." Either way of understanding evaluativity will do for the purposes of this paper.

I now turn to another characteristic that linguists use to classify adjectives, less well-understood but more relevant to our needs than gradability: *dimensionality* (see e.g. Bierwisch 1989, Sassoon 2013). The main test to check whether an adjective is multidimensional is to check whether it may be felicitously used with constructions such as *in every/some/most respect(s)* or *except for* (Sassoon 2013: 336).[6] As shown below, all-purpose evaluative adjectives such as 'good' and aesthetic adjectives such as 'beautiful' pattern with multidimensional adjectives such as 'similar', while certain predicates of taste such as 'salty' pattern with unidimensional adjectives such as 'tall'.

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5 Similarly, some philosophers, notably Richard (2008), appeal to gradable adjectives as a motivation for relativism. See Glanzberg (2007) and Stojanovic (2011) for a critical assessment of Richard's proposal.

6 These criteria are indicative rather than conclusive. In particular, 'except for' can be understood as referring to a part of the object that fails to instantiate the property, enhancing the felicity of sentences such as (9) (note though that the part-exception reading fails for (10), because 'tall' does not apply to parts of a body). Also, *in every respect* may be coerced into a metalinguistic reading, giving rise to puns such as "The titles of this newspaper are bold in every respect".

1. These cars are similar in every respect.
2. This car is good in every respect.
3. Paris is beautiful in every respect.
4. ?This soup is salty in every respect.
5. #She is tall in every respect.

6. These cars are similar, except for their speed capacity.
7. This car is good, except for its speed capacity.
8. Paris is beautiful, except for cleanliness/except for being a bit dirty.
9. ?This soup is salty, except for the noodles.
10. #She is tall, except for the upper part of her body.

To decide whether an adjective that denotes a multidimensional property truthfully applies to some individual involves not only determining a threshold of applicability, but also determining which dimensions contribute to the property in question, as well as the relative weights of these dimensions. Thus consider an uncontroversially multidimensional adjective, such as 'similar', and consider the sentence "These two cars are similar", where the cars being demonstrated are a bright red shining Jaguar and a mud-covered green Mazda. In a context in which we are comparing cars based, say, on their speed capacity and engine power, the sentence may well be true, while in a context in which we are comparing cars based on their color and, more generally, on their look, the sentence will likely be false. What accounts for this divergence in truth value are not the properties of the two cars or how they relate to each other, as these remain the same in the two contexts; rather, it is a divergence regarding which dimensions are taken to be relevant to establishing a scale of comparison relative to which the cars may be judged to be similar or not.

2.2. A toy-semantics for 'intense'

The adjective 'intense' is evaluatively neutral, which is to say that a sentence like "Hardy's acting is intense" may be used to convey a positive value-judgment, but also a negative one, depending on the context. For example, in the context of a review of Mad Max: Fury Road as in example (2) from 1.1., it will be positive. But suppose that the context at stake if one in which we are talking about what was meant to be a light-hearted comedy but failed. Then it may well be negative.[7] Now, 'intense' is gradable, and it also passes the tests for multidimensionality:

1. Hardy's acting is intense in every respect.

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[7] The negative use of 'intense' is illustrated by the following example, adapted from http://culturedvultures. com/did-you-know-eric-stoltz-is-still-in-back-to-the-future/: "Any self-proclaimed movie buff will be able to tell you of a time when Eric Stoltz was Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*. Coming across as intense and not really suited to the role, director Robert Zemeckis took the steps to replace him with Michael J. Fox." Thanks to Michael Murez for pointing it out to me.

2. Hardy's acting is intense, except for the way he speaks.

How is the truth value of simple sentences such as the one below to be determined?

3. Hardy's acting is intense.

As with any gradable adjective, we need a scale, and a threshhold on that scale. But how do we establish the scale of intensity? With an adjective such as 'tall', there is a conventionally associated scale, namely height, and a straightforward way of ordering (physical) objects on that scale. But there is no such unique scale of intensity, and this is because there are many ways in which a thing can be intense. Those ways of being intense correspond to dimensions. The context needs to determine, first, what the relevant dimensions are; second, it needs to determine the weight of each dimension, so that they may be combined into a single scale of intensity; third, it needs to fix a threshold d on that single scale.[8] Finally, only to those entities that are above d will it be correct to apply the bare adjective 'intense'.

For illustration, consider a context c_1 for (3) that singles out four dimensions as relevant to assessing the application of 'intense': intensity in gesticulation (G), in movement (M), in speech production (SP), and intensity in display of emotion (DE). Let each of those correspond to a closed scale of 1 to 100.[9] Let's assume that in c_1, Hardy's acting, denoted ha, figures on those scales as follows:[10] $G(ha)=72$, $M(ha)=79$, $SP(ha)=23$, $DE(ha)=94$. Finally, let's assume that in c_1, all four dimensions are given equal weights in computing the final scale S_1, and that the threshold d is set at 60 (that is to say, "x is intense" is true w.r. to scale S_1 iff $S_1(x)\geq60$). All four dimensions being equally weighed, we get that $S_1(ha)=67$, hence (3) comes out true in c_1. Now, compare this with a context c_2, which is exactly as c_1 except that display of emotion is not a relevant dimension at all. Assume that the weight is again distributed equally over the remaining three dimensions, and that the threshold of the final scale is set again at 60. In context c_2, we get it that $S_2(ha)=58$, hence (3) comes out false in c_2.

This illustration leaves a number of interesting questions open, such as: How does the context single out those dimensions? What determines where a given object or event figures on a given dimension? Do these dimensions, or at least, some among them, need to be relativized to an agent, or to an experiencer, who perceives intensity? Does the meaning of the adjective constrain the choice of the relevant dimensions? I will address some among these questions in due time. For now, this fairly standard toy

8 How the context determines all of this is a difficult and controversial issue. It is an issue, though, not for semantics proper, but for metasemantics (see Glanzberg 2007). Often, what the relevant dimensions are and where to set the threshold are questions that are subject to negotiation among the conversation participants, generating disagreements (see Sundell 2015).

9 Although open scales would be more accurate, I am assuing closed scales because that makes it easier to see how they combine into a single scale.

10 Let me stress that we are looking for two contexts in which one and the same acting is correctly described as intense, yet in one, the evaluation conveyed is positive, while in the other, it is negative. This is why the position of Hardy's acting on the different dimensions had better be kept fixed.

semantics should provide a sufficient background in order to address the puzzle of valence-underspecification.

3.   The context-sensitivity of valence

In this section, I would like to propose a solution to the two puzzles, as they arise with adjectives 'intense', 'harrowing', and other structurally similar adjectives. In the case of valence-underspecification, the proposed solution exploits the multidimensional nature of such adjectives. The suggestion, in a nutshell, is that, in a given context, some dimensions may be positively valued and others negatively. Hence if a positive dimension is highly salient and has more weight over other dimensions, the statement as a whole may inherit this positive valence, and, conversely, if a negative dimension is dominant, the valence carried by the statement will be negative. I will introduce the proposal with an example for which we have clear intuitions about which dimensions are positive and which ones are negative. However, in certain cases, the question of deciding whether a given dimension is to be valued positively, negatively, or neither is itself context-sensitive. I will motivate this form of context-sensitivity with some examples, and then put it to work in accounting for the puzzle of valence-reversal.

3.1.   Accounting for valence-underspecification

Let me start with an example of value-judgment that doesn't belong to the realm of aesthetic judgment, but rather, of moral judgment. Consider the adjective 'audacious', which, depending on the context, may convey something positive, but also something negative.[11] Let us grant that there are several dimensions relevant to establishing the scale with respect to which the adjective is interpreted. Let us further assume that one of those dimensions is courage, and another, recklessness or exposure to risk. (Which other dimensions, if any, are relevant to establishing a scale of audacity is a question for lexical semantic.) Now suppose that we are in a context in which the dimension of courage is highly weighed. Since courage is a good thing, describing a person or an action as "audacious" will, in such a context, convey a positive evaluation. Conversely, consider a context in which recklessness and exposure to risk are the salient dimensions. Since both of them are normally perceived as bad, describing a person or an action as "audacious" in such a context will likely convey a negative evaluation of this person or action.

With this intuitive picture in mind, we can now turn to our working example,

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11 Both uses are so systematic that many dictionaries posit two senses for 'audacious'. E.g. The definition on Google: 1. showing a willingness to take surprisingly bold risks; 2. showing an impudent lack of respect. The definition in Webster: 1. having or exhibiting an unabashed or fearless spirit; 2. presumptuous; shameless, insolent. It is important to realize, however, that even if we restrict the interpretation to one sense only (say, the first), the valence may still vary with the context.

the adjective 'intense'. Recall our last example:

4.   Hardy's acting is intense.

In section 2.2., we saw how the truth value of a statement such as (4) can vary from context to context, and this even when there is no change whatsoever in Hardy's acting itself. In this section, what we are interested in is how this statement can vary in valence from context to context, and this, similarly, without there having to be any change whatsoever in Hardy's acting. So let us contrast two contexts, c_3 and c_4, such that in c_3, (4) conveys a positive evaluation of Hardy's acting, and in c_4, it conveys a negative evaluation. (To make the scenario more intuitive, let c_3 be a context where the scenes shot are meant for an action movie, and c_4, one in which they are meant for a light-hearted comedy.) For simplicity, let us assume the same four dimensions as in 2.2., namely: intensity in gesticulation (G), movement (M), speech production (SP), and display of emotion (DE). Let us also assume and that in both contexts, Hardy's acting (ha) figures again on those scales as follows: G(ha)=72, M(ha)=79, SP(ha)=23, DE(ha)=94. Finally, let us make further *evaluative* assumptions: let's assume that it is a *good* thing for the acting under consideration that it be intense in movement and in gesticulation, a *bad* thing that it be intense in display of emotion, and neither good nor bad when it comes to speech production. (I shall shortly return to the question of what makes a given dimension a good one or a bad one.) Now let c_3 be a context in which G and M each get to count for 35%, and SP and DE for 15%, and let c_4 be a context in which DE alone gets 50% of the weight and the other three, 16,66% each. Though the scales computed in the two contexts will be somewhat different, the sentence in (4) will be true in both (assuming a reasonable threshold). However, in c_3, the sentence will likely convey a positive evaluation, because of Hardy's acting scoring high on two positive dimensions, both of which are weighed more than the other two. On the other hand, in c_4, the dimension of intensity in display of emotion is clearly dominant, and given that Hardy's acting also scores very high on it, it will be the negative valence of this dimension that the statement as a whole inherits and conveys.

3.2.   Accounting for valence-reversal

I have outlined a solution to the puzzle of *Valence-underspecification*. However, the solution partly relies on the idea of "good" and "bad" dimensions, and one may legitimately ask: which dimensions are good, which ones are bad, and in general, how do we go about in deciding the question?

To fully answer the question of what makes certain dimensions good and others bad would be tantamount to addressing certain difficult questions from value-theory and metaethics. I have no such hopes here, but let me try to give a rough idea of the underlying picture. Whether something – say, a situation, a course of events, or an action – is *good* is a question that only makes sense if it is asked in a specific context,

with a specific background of considerations and often, while having some implicit beneficiary in mind. For example, is it a good thing that Osama Ben-Laden was killed? In answering yes, we typically mean that, given that he was the dangerous terrorist that he was, it was good – for the humanity – that he was killed. But this is of course compatible with the fact that for Osama himself, *qua* living organism, it was not a good thing to be killed. Here are a couple more examples that show that things are not good or bad *simpliciter*. Is drinking milk good? Well, milk contains calcium, it is indispensible for babies' survival and growth, and so one. But of course, if one is lactose-intolerant, then drinking milk is bad for such a person, rather than good. As yet another example, consider self-induced vomiting. Vomiting can be extremely dangerous: if the content enters the respiratory tract, one may choke, asphyxiate, and die. It also causes erosions to the esophagus, and leads to a loss of acids, possibly leading to metabolic acidosis. Vomiting is also bad because it destroys tooth enamel due to the acidity of the vomit, and it is often a fairly unpleasant experience. Given all this, self-induced vomiting is a bad action, one ought not do it. However, if one has previously ingested poisonous food, then self-induced vomiting can save one's life and is the best thing to do. To drive the point home, whether one ought to make oneself throw up, or whether self-induced vomiting is good or bad, crucially depends on the circumstances.

To upshot of these examples is that there are normally many factors that need to be taken into account in order to decide whether something is, objectively speaking, good or bad. I suggest that the same goes for deciding whether scoring high on a given dimension is good or bad. To return to our working example, being intense in gesticulation and movement may be a good thing for a protagonist of an action movie, but a bad thing for a protagonist of a light-hearted comedy. Similarly, being harrowing may be a bad thing for most events or situations, but a good thing, say, for a movie that a spectator precisely goes to watch with the expectation of that kind of experience. Just as it can be occasionally good to throw up, it can also be occasionally good to expose oneself to a harrowing experience.

The account that I propose for the puzzle of *Valence-reversal* is fairly simple. We think of harrowing as a negatively connoted adjective because being harrowing is, in general, bad. However, there are exceptions to this generalization, and movies of a certain genre are precisely such. And because in such contexts being harrowing *is* a positive feature of a movie, to describe one as such conveys a positive evaluation.

At this point, one might wonder why the same simple explanation shouldn't already account for *Valence-underspecification*. I do not doubt that in some cases, it might. However, the adjectives that we have been discussing require a more elaborate solution. Consider 'intense'. In determining which valence is conveyed, the context is required twice. First, it determines which dimensions are relevant to the application of the adjective, and how they combine into a single scale. Second, it determines which ones are positive, which ones are negative, and which ones are neither. These are two very different roles. The difference between the two roles is very similar to the way in which, more generally, context is required to determine a truth value of a sentence.

Consider the sentence "It is snowing". The context is needed to determine which place we are talking about. If the sentence is uttered in Tbilisi, we understand that what it states is that it is snowing in Tbilisi. Second, the context tells us which state of affairs we are in, that is to say, it tells us what is the case and what is not. If we are in a state of affairs in which it is snowing in Tbilisi, the sentence is true; otherwise it is false.

4. Open issues and prospects for the future

My aim in this paper has been to show how certain evaluatively neutral adjectives, such as 'intense', may, in suitable contexts, express value-judgments. The focus has been on multidimensional adjectives, which are arguably the core set of adjectives used in aesthetic discourse. My proposal exploits certain independently motivated features of the semantics of these adjectives; in particular, the fact that the dimensions relevant to establishing the scale with respect to which these adjectives are interpreted may vary from context to context. The gist of my proposal is to point out that these dimensions themselves come with a certain (often contextually established) valence, and that this valence percolates, so to speak, through the semantics of the adjective, so as to provide the entire statement with a certain valence, thereby giving rise to the expression of a value-judgment.

This proposal leaves a number of issues open, most of which fall well beyond the scope of this paper. In this last section, I shall briefly touch upon two issues. The first concerns the relationship between the kind of adjectives that I have discussed and *thick terms*, and the second goes one step further in trying to understand the complex semantic architecture of those adjectives.

4.1. Evaluatively neutral adjectives vs. thick terms

The question of how evaluatively neutral adjectives, such as 'intense' or 'simple', may acquire an evaluative use, and one whose valence depends on the context, has, to my best knowledge, been largely neglected.[12] One notable exception is Pekka Väyrynen's

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12 In linguistics, there has been some discussion of a phenomenon akin to valence-underspecification, in the discussion of expressive content. McCready (2012) discusses the way in which the intensifier 'fucking' may get a positive or a negative valence, depending on the context. He gives the following examples:
(i) Fucking Mike Thyson won another fight.
(ii) Fucking Mike Thyson got arrested again for domestic violence.
As McCready notes, while we can felicitously continue (i) by saying "He is great", we normally cannot do so in the case of (ii). In other words, 'fucking' in (i) expresses a positive evaluation, and in (ii), a negative one. McCready offers a pragmatic account of this variability in valence, which goes roughly as follows. An expected interpretation for an emotive expression like 'fucking' is computed (in a context) on the basis of shared knowledge. E.g., the conversational participants in (ii) believe, and take each other to believe, that if someone is arrested for domestic violence, it must be because this person is indeed violent, which is a bad

work on thick concepts (2012, 2013). Though it originates in metaethics, Väyrynen's work is an important step towards understanding the semantics and pragmatics of adjectives used in conveying value-judgments, including aesthetic judgments.

Väyrynen locates the evaluative import of thick terms entirely in pragmatics. Here is a quote that aptly summerizes his proposal: "The evaluations that thick terms and concepts may be used to convey are generalized but defeasible *conversational* implications of utterances involving such terms and concepts" (2012: 267, my italics).

One important motivation for Väyrynen comes from the discussion of so called *objectionable* thick terms, such as 'chaste' or 'lewd'. Thus the use of 'chaste' seems to carry a positive evaluation. However, the evaluation is based on the assumption that abstaining from sexual activity is good, and since this need not be the case, it seems possible to object to the use of the term without denying that the property effectively described by 'chaste' (i.e. abstaining from sex) holds. By removing the evaluational aspects from the property actually denoted by the term, and placing them at the level of generalized conversational implicatures, Väyrynen aims to explain how in using such thick terms, evaluations are systematically triggered without being semantically entailed. Väyrynen then generalizes his proposal to all thick terms, based on the observation that in principle, *any* thick term may turn out to be objectionable.

The adjectives that I have been discussing, such as 'intense', are normally not considered to belong among thick terms, since there is no specific evaluation that is systematically associated with them. Nevertheless, Väyrynen's proposal can easily be extended to evaluatively neutral terms, given that he holds that even the paradigmatic thick terms are in fact, from a semantic point of view, evaluatively neutral.

Whatever the merits and the drawbacks of Väyrynen's proposal, for the present purposes, let us note than my proposal is compatible with his and, more importantly, that it *complements* his in the following respect. Pragmatic accounts such as Väyrynen (2013), or, for that matter, McCready (2012), rely on speakers' and hearers' beliefs and even shared *knowledge* about which things are (in a given context) good or bad. Thus for Väyrynen, describing an action as courageous (normally) conveys a positive evaluation because it is (normally) common ground among conversation participants that courageous actions are good and worthy of praise. As applied to our examples of aesthetic judgment, the idea would be that in describing a movie as "intense" and "harrowing", the speaker and the hearer share the belief that it is good for the movie at stake to be intense and harrowing, which then gives rise to the conversational implicature that it is a good movie. But note that such pragmatic accounts tell us little or nothing about what grounds such evaluative beliefs. In my account, on the other hand, in a context in which the relevant dimension for interpreting intensity is a good one, and the movie scores high on that dimension, the movie's being intense *entails*

characteristic. The speaker is aware of what the hearer will expect to be the probable interpretation, and based on this, decides whether to use an underspecified emotive expression or not. Note, though, that there is an important difference between the sort of cases that McCready considers and the ones that interest us here. McCready's cases involve expressives, whose very function is to carry emotive content. In our cases, the expressions at stake ('intense', 'ambitious' etc.) have a descriptive content and are not in need of being assigned any additional evaluative or emotive content.

(relative to that context) that it is a good movie (in the relevant respect). My account thus makes room in the semantics itself for such evaluative beliefs, which are needed as a starting point for the inference chains postulated by the pragmatic accounts.

Perhaps even more interestingly, my account is also compatible with the view that there are thick terms, if these are understood as terms that are both descriptive and evaluative, and such that evaluativity is *recorded in their meaning*, so to speak. Now, the puzzle of valence-reversal shows that even a term that is lexically marked as negative, as we may assume that 'harrowing' is, can have uses in which it does not convey (let alone entail) a negative evaluation. How could one, in face of this, still hold that such a term is a genuine thick term? In order to explain how, let me turn to an example in which the negative valence is even more systematic and robust than in the case of 'harrowing'. Consider the adjective 'disgusting'. Describing something or someone as "disgusting" typically and systematically conveys a negative judgment about that thing or person. This systematicity in the associated negative evaluation is something that, on the long run, gets to be so closely attached to the word's use that it becomes part of the word's meaning. And indeed, finding, or even just imagining, the concept 'disgusting' being applied to someone or something without conveying any negative evaluation is quite difficult. But difficult doesn't mean impossible, and in aesthetic discourse, there can even be a valence-reversal for 'disgusting', as illustrated in the following excerpt of a review of Cronenberg's *The Fly:*[13]

There are few things as viscerally unsettling as your own body's rebellion against you, and the film accumulates a wealth of sublimely disgusting moments. While there are a number of beautifully simple beats like Brundle removing his fingernails and spraying fluid from his digits, *The Fly*'s coup de grace, Brundle's final transformation, is one of cinema's most viscerally disgusting moments. (Alex Williams, Cinapse, 7 August 2015).

The second occurrence of 'disgusting' in this excerpt is used in order to convey what is ultimately a very positive aesthetic judgement. Note, however, that in contrast with the examples from section 1.1., it takes the writer quite some effort to set up a context in which 'disgusting' may ultimately receive such a positive interpretation.

4.2.   Looking ahead: experiencers and beneficiaries

In this very last section, I would like to turn to a set of broader issues that concern the semantic underpinnings of evaluative adjectives, and, more generally, adjectives used to express value-judgments. Among such adjectives, an important number have, in their logical forms, *implicit arguments*. The notion of implicit argument is easy to illustrate with verbs. Consider the sentence "Inma saw." The sentence only makes sense if uttered in a context in which there is some salient scene or event that Inma is reported to have seen. This scene or event serves as the value to the implicit *theme*

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13 For full review, see http://cinapse.co/2015/08/07/flys-terrifying-ever-pick-week/

argument that comes with the verb '(to) see' – argument that can of course be made *explicit*, as in "Inma saw Mishka slapping his boss". What kind of implicit arguments there are, which lexical categories allow them, or how we identify them are difficult and controversial issues at the syntax-semantics interface (see e.g. Condoravdi and Gawron 1996, Gillon 2008). While I wish to avoid those complexities as much as possible, there are two kinds of implicit arguments that a satisfactory and comprehensive discussion of evaluative adjectives ought to take into account. The first is the *experiencer* argument. Thus some adjectives describe properties whose applicability may depend on the way in which they are experienced by some sentient individual (or group of individuals). Examples include adjectives such as *painful, loud, difficult*, as well as, in general, predicates of personal taste, such as *tasty* and *fun*.[14] The experiencer argument is also found with adjectives that are derived from verbs denoting situations that involve experiencers, such as *shocking*, *astonishing, disturbing, amazing, enjoyable, boring*, as well as *moving* (which figures in Sibley's list), *harrowing, thrilling* and *disgusting* (which figure in the examples discussed in this paper). Such derived adjectives are generally abundant in aesthetic discourse.

Various diagnostics have been proposed to distinguish adjectives that come with an experiencer argument from those that do not. When the adjective is deverbal, a clear indicator is the possibility of adding a *to* or *for* phrase that identifies the experiencer in the event described by the verb root, as in the following transitions:

1. The idea shocked/disgusted/bored/astonished/offended us.
2. The idea was shocking/disgusting/boring/astonishing/offensive to us.

However, this diagnostic is more difficult to apply with adjectives that are not derived from verbs. Another diagnostic that is used to identify adjectives with experiencers is whether they may be used felicitously with the *find* construction (Sæbø (2009), Bylinina 2014, Umbach 2015). Such adjectives are licensed in the comparative form in the complement of 'find':

1. We find Inma's proposal more shocking/disgusting/boring/offensive/astonishing than Mishka's.
2. We find this task more difficult than the last one.
3. I find Reblochon cheese tastier than Gauda cheese.

However, this diagnostic must be applied with care, as adjectives that do not come with an experiencer argument can appear in *find* constructions, as in "I find her tall." In line with the proposal defended in McNally and Stojanovic (2015), I submit that for such uses to be felicitous, the attribution of tallness is made on the basis of the

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14 In the growing literature on predicates of personal taste, there is no concensus regarding the presence an experiencer argument. For instance, Lasersohn (2005) and Sundell (2015) do not think that experiencers are represented in the syntactico-semantic structure, whereas Glanzberg (2007), Stojanovic (2007), Stephenson (2007), Sæbø (2009), Bylinina (2014) and McNally and Stojanovic (2015) argue that experiencers (at least for certain predicates) must taken into account at some level of the analysis.

speaker's prior experience with different individuals' heights. Thus, notwithstanding appearance, the *find* construction introduces an experiencer argument, even if the argument is not initially associated with the adjective embedded under 'find'.

With this by way of background, we may wonder about the status of 'intense' with respect to the experiencer argument. Whether or not there is such an argument appears to partly depend on the subject. Thus compare the following two:

1. This medical treatment is intense for most patients.
2. ?Hardy's acting is intense for most spectators.

In a sentence such as (1), the experiencer argument is licenced because the patients are undergoing the treatment, hence having a direct experience of it. In a sentence such as (2), the spectators are not quite in an analogous position with respect to Hardy's acting. This suggests that 'intense' takes the experiencer argument optionally.

The second kind of implicit argument that turns out to be relevant to the issues of our present concern is the beneficiary argument, which, informally, stands for the individual for whose benefit an action is performed, as in "Inma studies hard for her parents". Although the beneficiary argument has been little discussed in philosophical literature, I am bringing it to attention because the basic evaluative adjectives 'good' and 'bad' at least have uses on which they should be seen as encoding this argument. Consider:

4. It is good for Inma that she has passed the exam.
5. It is good that Inma passed the exam.
6. That was a bad decision.

In (4), the beneficiary argument is explicit – it is Inma. In (5) and (6), it is implicit. As for (5), there are contexts in which Inma is understood to be the implicit beneficiary: it is herself who benefits from passing the exam; but there are possible contexts in which someone else is so understood – for example, her parents. As for (6), typically we understand that the decision was bad *for* the person who made the decision – but again, this interpretation is not mandatory. Although I have not been concerned with the semantics of 'good' and 'bad' in this paper, the fact that they often entail an implicit beneficiary helps understand better how whether a given dimension counts as good or bad may depend on the circumstances, as discussed in section 3.2.

Although both valence-underspecification and valence-reversal are puzzles that arise equally well in the absence of experiencers and beneficiaries, the proposal presented in this paper is also meant to apply to adjectives that come with implicit arguments of this kind. What is more, the two adjectives in our working examples, 'intense' and 'harrowing', do allow for such an argument. We have seen that with 'intense', the argument appears to be optional. Thus, for example, "This movie is intense" may arguably give rise to two readings. On one reading, 'intense' does not come with any experiencer argument, and a monadic, gradable property (determined in the context) is predicated of the movie *qua* entity (what kind of entity movies are

will depend on one's preferred ontology and need not concern us here). On another reading, 'intense' comes with an implicit experiencer argument, and a relational property, namely being intense *to x*, is predicated of the movie *qua* event, and of some contextually determined experiencer or group of experiencers (say, those watching the movie) that serve as a value for *x*. As for 'harrowing', the fact that it is a deverbal adjective, and that the verb '(to) harrow', in the relevant sense, denotes situations that involve an experiencer, is evidence that the adjective itself encodes this experiencer in its argument structure.

Once we admit implicit arguments, a range of issues arises. One important issue concerns the question of what kind of value this argument can take, and on what kind of syntactic, lexical or other constraints there are on the values that it can take. These are important metasemantic issues, that have been partly addressed in the literature on predicates of personal taste (see e.g. Sæbø (2009), Stojanovic (2012), Pearson (2013), Bylinina (2014)). For our purposes, let us assume that, in certain contexts at least, the argument can be bound by a covert generic operator, and let us leave it open what further constraints there may be for the other cases. Another crucial issue is to understand how the experiencer argument and the beneficiary argument interact with various other parameters (scales, dimensions, thresholds, comparison classes) that figure in the semantics of multidimensional adjectives. I hope to return to this issue on a future occasion.

Acknowledgments

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