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How does the expressive uses of ‘muito’ (Brazilian Portuguese) challenges its unified analysis?

Como o uso expressivo de ‘muito’ (Português Brasileiro) põe em xeque a sua análise unificada?

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ABSTRACT

“Muito” is a prototypical degree modifier (intensifier) in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). It can modify adjectives, verbal phrases, nouns (count and mass) and adverbs, as long as they are scalar. In all domains, “muito” is a degree booster. Its semantics is akin to the one proposed by Kennedy & McNally (2005) to the English degree modifier “very” and may alternatively be expressed as a differential function. There is no s-selection by “muito” in quality scales (as provided by adjectives). Nevertheless, in quantity scales, “muito” operates exclusively on open scales. Verbal aspectual dimensions are quantity scales. Nouns also provide quantity scales (volume, number) For “muito” to be licensed, the amount must not have an upper limit. With this provision, a unified analysis of “muito” is attainable. (Gomes, 2018, Quadros Gomes, 2025). Only one case, noticed by Sanchez-Mendes (2022), resists to fit in: the expressive “muito” in examples like “Foi muito golpe!” (It was really a coup d’état). This article sizes those challenges to the unified account, discusses the lengths and shorts of Sanchez-Mendes (2022) proposal for the case at hand and brings in an analysis that reconciles those expressive uses with a general semantics for “muito”. It proposes that emphatic “muito” promotes a comparison between the truth alternatives for the sentence and asserts that the affirmative one is far more accurate, based on epistemic/believe states than the negative. The pragmatic effects are confirmation effects. So, at the end of the day, “muito” always contributes an implicit superiority comparison, never a closed scale.

Keywords:

Expressive “muito”, Degree modifiers, Verum focum, Degree Semantics, Pragmatics.

RESUMO

“Muito”, um modificador de grau prototípico do Português Brasileiro (PB), modifica adjetivos, locuções verbais, substantivos (contáveis e massivos) e advérbios, desde que escalares. Em todos os domínios, “muito” é um amplificador de graus. Sua semântica é semelhante à proposta por Kennedy e McNally (2005) para o modificador de grau inglês “very” e pode, alternativamente, ser expressa como uma função diferencial. Não há seleção semântica por “muito” em escalas de qualidade (como as de adjetivos). No entanto, nas de quantidade, “muito” opera exclusivamente sobre escalas abertas. Dimensões aspectuais verbais são escalas de quantidade; os sintagmas nominais também as fornecem (volume, número).

Para “muito” ser licenciado, a quantidade não pode ter um limite superior. Isto posto, uma análise unificada de “muito” é alcançada. (Gomes, 2018; 2025). Apenas um caso, observado por Sanchez-Mendes (2022), resiste a se encaixar: o expressivo “muito”, presente em exemplos como “Foi muito golpe!”. Este artigo destrincha tais desafios à explicação unificada, discute a proposta de Sanchez-Mendes (2022) para o caso em questão e apresenta uma nova análise que concilia tais usos expressivos com uma semântica geral para “muito”. Propõe-se que o “muito” enfático promove uma comparação entre as alternativas de valor de verdade para a proposição e afirma que a afirmativa é muito mais apropriada, com base em estados epistêmicos/de crença, do que a negativa. Os efeitos pragmáticos são de confirmação enfática. Assim, no fim das contas, mantêm-se que “muito” sempre contribui com uma comparação implícita de superioridade, nunca com uma escala fechada.

Palavras-chave:

“Muito” expressivo, Modificadores de grau, Verum foco, Semântica de graus, Pragmática.

Introduction: the unified analysis of “muito” and a challenge to it

“Muito” modifies adjectives (1a), verbal phrases (1b), nouns, both count (1c) and mass (1d) and adverbs (1e). There is no category selection, only semantic selection: the modifier operates exclusively on gradable predicates. The large range of categories is exemplified in (1):

- (1) a. Buenos Aires é uma cidade muito bonita.
BA is a very beautiful city.
- b. Eu dormi muito (de ontem pra hoje)
I slept a lot (last night).
- c. Meus avós tiveram muito(s) filho(s).
My grandparents had a lot of children.
- d. Tem muito açúcar no café.
There is too much sugar in my coffee.
- e. O aeroporto fica muito longe daqui.
The airport is very far from here.

Despite its comprehensive presence through domains, modifying nominals, adjectives, verbal phrases and adverbs, for some linguistics a unified semantic analysis of this modifier is attainable (Quadros Gomes, 2011a, 2011b; 2018; Quadros Gomes & Sanchez-Mendes, 2015; Pires de Oliveira and Souza, 2018; Quadros Gomes *et al.*, 2021; *inter alia*). “Muito” is a prototypical intensifier in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). It is a degree booster, introducing a superiority implicit comparative, as the following paraphrases of sentences (1) show:

- (2)
- a. Buenos Aires é uma cidade muito bonita.
BA is more beautiful than... (most cities).
 - b. Eu dormi muito (de ontem pra hoje)
I slept more than... (usual).
 - c. Meus avós tiveram muito(s) filho(s).
My grandparents had more children than... (the new generation has)
 - d. Tem muito açúcar no café.
There is more sugar in my coffee than... (I would like)
 - e. O aeroporto é muito longe daqui.
The airport is even more distant from here than... (from home)

The unified semantics proposed for “muito” is similar to the one proposed by Kennedy & McNally (2005) for English “very”:

$$(i) \llbracket \text{muito} \rrbracket c = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [\text{standard}(d)(G)(\lambda y. \llbracket \text{pos}(G)(y) \rrbracket c) \wedge G(d)(x)]$$

$$(ii) \llbracket \text{muito} \rrbracket c = \lambda G \langle d, et \rangle \lambda x \exists d [G(d)(x) \wedge d \gg c \text{ standard} c (G)]$$

Those formulas state that “muito” selects a degree expression as argument and produces a predicate that requires an even higher degree to be true. The standard required by the degree expression when not yet modified by “muito” may not be enough after “muito” applies. So, even if John, measuring 1,85 m, qualifies as “alto” “tall”, considering that, in Brazil, the average man is 1,73m, John will not qualify as “muito alto” “very tall”. As a degree booster, “muito” may alternatively be treated by a differential measure function version:

$$(iii) \llbracket \text{muito} \rrbracket = \lambda G \langle d, et \rangle \lambda x \exists d [G(d)(x) \wedge \text{larger} c (d \text{ standard} c (G))]$$

The differential measure function formula states that the degree interval between the compared terms, i.e., between the degree of the property hold by the argument of “muito” and the standard of comparison (retrieved by the discourse context), must be large. It does not suffice for the argument of “muito” to exhibit a degree above the standard; the difference between the two compared objects also needs to be pronounced.

Either way, the proposed unified semantics of “muito” is the semantics of an (implicit) superiority comparison. The “largeness” in distance required between the degrees of the compared objects is of subjective nature. Regardless of the variability in judgments of “largeness”, “muito” always requires its argument to have the higher degree among the two compared objects, i.e., its argument must significantly surpass the (contextually provided,

not realized in the sentence) second term of the comparison regarding the amount of the relevant property.

As established by the seminal work of Kennedy & McNally (2005), English degree modifiers specialize each in a certain scale structure: “well” s-selects scales closed at the maximum boundary, “much” scales closed at the minimum, and “very” s-selects open scales. Also, “very” operates exclusively over adjectives. Many Brazilian Portuguese (BP)¹ degree modifiers (such as “muito”, “pouco”, “bastante”, “demais”) do not distinguish a certain scale structure in their s-selection, but produce after the modification a more complex structure that necessarily shows only one and the same scale structure (see Gomes, 2009, 2018; Quadros Gomes, 2011b, Quadros Gomes & Sanchez-Mendes, 2015; Quadros Gomes & Delduque, 2019; and Gomes, Do Nascimento Gomes & De Souza Medeiros, 2021; a. o.). “Muito” can modify any type of quality scale, so it operates on any gradable adjective, but the output of the modification will always be an open scale, as showed by the contrast between (3) and (4):

- (3) a. O copo está cheio (a maximal reading: 100% of occupation)
The glass is full
- b. The occupation of the glass reaches the upmost point

- (4) a. O copo está muito cheio (a non-maximal reading: less than 100% of occupation)
The glass is MUITO full
- b. The glass is fuller than the speaker would expect/ would like it to be

“Cheio” “full” is an absolute gradable adjective, requiring a maximal degree of the property, therefore dubbed “Amax”. If in the situation of evaluation there is a half full (or half empty) glass, (3) will be false. However, (4) may be true of such a half full/empty glass, provided the speaker expectation for the contents amount was lower. For instance, if the speaker does not usually consumes alcohol and his/her friends insist with him/her to drink just a sip, promising to give him/her exactly the enough amount to enable sim/her to take part in a toast, and (s)he accepts, after the drink is served up to the middle of the glass, this speaker may rightfully complain about the excess of beverage (s)he is supposed to gulp up by saying (4). So, if English “very”, as pointed out in the literature, cannot modify absolute adjectives (*“The glass is very full”, “The glass is totally full”), “muito” can: “muito cheio” is fine. However, while the plain adjective “cheio” requires the object referred by the modified noun to exhibit a maximum degree, “muito cheio” does not. As described in the literature for any plain relative (open scale) adjective, “muito” + adjective only requires that the referent of the modified noun shows the higher degree between the two comparison terms. So, the product of a modification by “muito” is that of an implicit superiority comparison, regardless of the structure of the scale of the gradable predicate beforehand and regardless of the category of the modified predicate.

¹ It may be as well that the same holds for other varieties of Portuguese, such as, for example, European Portuguese, but, since we did not survey other varieties, we prefer to confine our analysis to the BP facts.

After almost a decade of investigation about the semantics of degree expressions in BP, a consensus seemed to be reached about the meaning of “muito”. The account was that such a degree modifier selects any gradable predicates to modify and produces, by modifying them, a gradable complex expression that has an open scale structure. However, the empirical coverage of the mentioned generalization was threatened by some data presented by Sanchez Mendes (2022), here repeated as (5):

- (5) a. Foi muito golpe!
'It was really a coup d'état'
- b. Vai ter muita Copa, gente!
'The World Cup will really happen.'
- c. Tá tendo muito greve sim!
'It is really happening a strike.'

The examples in (5) were collected from the Brazilian media (newspapers, social channels), during hot debates. The example (5a) circulated in three different contexts: (i) in the anniversaries of the political events of the third-first of April of 1964, when President João Goulart was deposed and a Military Government took over, which is referred by the arm as “The 1964 Revolution” and by historians as “The Military coup d'état”; (ii) regarding the impeachment of the president Dilma Rousseff, in 31 of August of 2016, dividing opinions: some say it was a coup d'état', some say it was legitimate administrative process; and finally, (iii) regarding the events that took place on the eight of January of 2023, when extremists did not accepted the results of the nearly finished presidential election and invaded government buildings, trashing everything they found in their way. Example (5b) relates to a debate about the rightness of employing such a high amount of money to prepare to host the 2014 Soccer World Cup; some people believed Brazil should refuse to be the World Cup headquarters and invest in public health and education, and campaigning in favor of their position by stating (5b). Finally, (5c) was brought about by disagreements regarding the chances of concretization of some announced strikes, such as some famous truck driver's strikes in Brazil, in 2018 and 2022.

Even being typically associated with hot debates, the examples in (5) are produceable in BP and cannot be treated as implicit superiority comparison. The paraphrases advanced in (6), (7) and (8) are not at all adequate to the sentences in (5):

- (6) a. Foi muito golpe!
b. #‘This one was more a coup d'état than some other event’
- (7) a. Vai ter muita Copa, gente!
b. #‘The World Cup will be here more than it will be in some other place.’
- (8) a. Tá tendo muito greve sim!
b. #‘The strike will take place more here than anywhere.’

As pointed out by Sanchez Mendes (2022, p. 96), “the first question rose by the data (...) is if there are two related but different meanings for “muito” (one for emphasis (...) and one for quantity and intensive readings”. Or, alternatively, if one can “postulate one single compositional analysis for all the uses” (Sanchez Mendes, 2022, p. 97). Although the author announces that “it is worthy to bet in a unified analysis” (Sanchez Mendes, 2022, p. 97), at the end of the day her account cannot be reconciliated with the view of “muito” always producing complex expressions associated exclusively with open scales; instead, the author analyses emphatic “muito” as saturating a maximal degree, as we will see soon in details. Only the gradability of “muito” is preserved in Sanchez-Mendes proposal, but the regular open scale production by modification is not in the picture anymore.

The purpose of this article is to present an alternative account of the challenging data, which better pursuits the goal of fully preserving the unified analysis of “muito”.

This article proceeds as follows: next section presents Sanches Mendes proposal; the following section brings about some facts about the data that remained unobserved in her work and introduces my account of the data. Finally, the closing remarks will comment on the possibility of maintaining in full the unifying analysis of “muito”, accommodating the challenging data.

1 The analysis for emphatic “muito” available in the market

At far as we know, Sanches Mendes (2022) was the first to expose the relevant data that put into question the unified analysis of “muito”, and also the first to offer an explanation. Her first move was to follow the steps of Beltrama and Bochnak (2015) for Italian and Washo expressive lexical items and of Beltrama (2018) for English “totally”, which is licensed only if the information added by the speaker is not taken for granted, or is even surprising or bizarre. Despite her recognition that “muito” does not depends as much on subjectivity as “totally” does, and that “muito” cannot so easily get an interpretation deviant from its degree modification use (akin to examples (1)), Sanches Mendes (2022, p.102) comes up with the idea that the emphatic uses (akin to examples (5)), of “muito” require the speaker commitment to emphasize his/her “certainty about the proposition”. Building up on the proposal of Romero & Han (2004) for the English expression “really”, she notices that emphatic “muito” is akin to Verum focus. But with a provision: according to her, while “really” is licensed exclusively by epistemically biased contexts, “totally” and “muito” can also be used in unbiased contexts. So, she says, emphatic “muito” is not quite “really” and not quite “totally”², but does reunite some aspects of each of those expressions. To capture the semantics of emphatic “muito”, Sanchez Mendes will propose that this operator works on a scale of precision in the terms of Morzycki (2011). To fulfill her goals, “to present a semantic analysis for emphatic “muito” that is derived from the same formal mechanism as the interpretation of gradable predicates” (Sanchez Mendes, 2022., p.103), the author will stipulate “a type-shifting function that makes words like “golpe” “coup” scalar, so that they can be modified by “muito”” (Sanchez Mendes, 2022., p.103).

The heart of the proposal is the maintenance of “muito” as a degree modifier, i.e., as an expression that s-selects gradable expressions to modify, providing a mechanism that

² “Totally” is a always maximizer, and “muito” is not.

converts a non-degree word into a term that undergoes modification as gradable, provided a certain number of conditions. The converting mechanism requires the participation of the noun target by the modified “muito” in a comparison that takes place in a precision scale, in the terms of Morzycki (2011). Such a precision scale is based on approximation relation, ordering degrees of similarity:

(iv) $\alpha \approx_{d,C} \beta$ iff, given the ordering imposed by the context C, α resembles β to (at least) the degree d and α and β are of the same type.

The formula in (iv) is from Morzycki (2011, p. 51, *apud* Sanchez Mendes, 2022, p.103). and states that a term (α) has a lesser or greater degree of resemblance to the most prototypical representant of some category (β). A resemblance is an equality comparison, but the formula provides space of approximation. So some imprecision is allowed in the resemblance equative comparison, and the degree of imprecision can be measured as well, in a scalar/ degree manner. Therefore, an operator on a precision scale such as the one described by (iv) will erase the imprecision, by boosting the closeness of the object referred to by the term undergoing modification to the ideal, master, maximum representative of the category. Applying (va) to the non-scalar to the term “golpe” “coup d’état”, we get a jump from a lesser degree of resemblance with a perfectly typical concept representant to a complete equality comparison, with is an overlapping between the degree of the property defines the term in the current use and the degree of the property exhibited by its most prototypical exemplar.

- (v) a. $\llbracket \text{PREC } \alpha \rrbracket d = \lambda d' . \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{d'}$
 b. $\llbracket \text{Deg}_{\text{noun}} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle e,t \rangle} \lambda d \lambda x. P(x) \wedge \text{“precision}_P\text{”}(x) = d$
 c. $\llbracket \text{golpe}_{\text{deg}} \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. \text{coup}(x) \wedge \text{“precision}_{\text{coup}}\text{”}(x) = d$

The line (a) in (v) comes from Morzycki (2011, p. 64, *apud* Sanchez Mendes, 2022, p.103-104) apply it to a noun (v-b) and specifically to the noun “golpe” “coup d’état”. The main point of this proposal is that “golpe” starts as a non-gradable predicate but becomes a gradable predicate after sitting in a precision scale (v-c).

A comment on the proposal is unavoidable at this point. So, by (v), the precision scale is responsible for the type-shifting of “golpe” from a non-scalar expression to a gradable one. So far, so good. But what is releasing the precision scale? Is it some attitude of the speaker? If so, an exact pragmatic configuration must yet be drawn in detail, or else the proposal will be out of the lines of a formal analysis. May the launching of the precision scale be the result of a type of last resource type-shifting, due to the presence of a degree modifier, searching for a degree expression to operate on, without finding any under his scope? If it was so, one would expect this outcome with any non-degree expression under the scope of “muito”. However, the facts do not endorse this generalization. It is not possible to turn just any non-degree nouns into gradable expressions in order to “save” the modification by “muito”, as exemplified in (9):

- (9) a. Foi muito amor.
[It was] a lot of love /#It was really love (this reading is not available)
- b. É muita gente.
[It is] a lot of people. /#It is really people (this reading is not available)
- c. É muito cansaço
[It is] very tiring/ #It is really tiredness (it is not an available reading)
- d. Foi muita estrada.
[It was] a long way/ a lot of roads/ #It is really a road (this reading is not available)

Emphatic “muito” is not encountered with every noun. How to predict which nouns allow for precision scale reading? And which nouns resist the type-shifting for gradable? There seems to be no smart way for racing this line of division. One may think that event nouns are the ones licensed under modification by “muito” by such a type-shifting device. Well, after all, “golpe” is polysemic, presenting three meanings: (i) ‘coup d’état’, (ii) blow/strike; (iii) scam/fraud. In the sense of ‘coup d’état’, “golpe” is an event noun; “copa” (‘world cup’) idem...In fact, only the event reading of “golpe” allows for the “precision” interpretation:

- (10) a. Ele recebeu muito golpe na cabeça!
He received a lot of blows on the head!
- b. Tem muito golpe por aí!
There are many scams out there.
- c. (Isso) Foi GOLPE, foi MUITO GOLPE, não só contra a Presidenta Dilma Rousseff, mas principalmente contra a nossa democracia.
It was a coup d’ état, it was REALLY a coup, not only against Dilma, but also against democracy

Unfortunately, it is not that simple... “Carro” “car” is never an event noun, no matter the context of utterance. And still a “precision” reading seems to be available:

- (11) O Opala é muito carro!
Opala is really a car/ Opala is a car by excellence.

“Carro” ‘car’ is not a gradable expression, nor an event noun, but in (11) it enables for the emphatic use of “muito”. What holds together nouns like “golpe” “coup d’état” and “carro” “car” is not clear. Is it in a precision scale? Well, if so, why nouns like the ones in (9) cannot sit in a precision scale? What properties or traces would make nouns like “carro” “car”,

“golpe” “coup d’ état” etc. special? Or, on the other hand, what exactly are the conditions required for a noun to sit in a precision scale?

What is clear is that not every noun is coercible by the type shifting described in (v). Most nouns resist it. Sanchez-Mendes does not explain what determines which nouns can and which nouns cannot be coerced to become gradable by the means of a precision scale. Besides this hole in predictability, due to the lack of a criteria to apart the convertible nouns from the non-convertible nouns, the type-shifting approach faces a problem to be characterized as a last resource to save the derivation, since it only works on a very small number of nouns. Run-of-the mill type-shifting devices are triggered by a mismatch between the noun type and the type selected by the operator. However, most non-gradable nouns (see ex. 9,) do not convert to gradable when “muito” is next to them, and yet the type-shifting they still resist could save the derivation.

This said, let us go back to Sanchez-Mendes (2022). Placing the solution on the noun, that type-shifts from non-gradable to a gradable term, the author can maintain a semantics for “muito” that works for all its uses, the semantics of a degree modifier that does not semantic select categories or scale structures, expressed as (vi):

$$(vi) \llbracket \textit{muito} \rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [G(d)(x) \wedge d \geq ds]$$

Being blind or indifferent to the nature of the scale it steps in, “muito” always applies to a gradable predicate and boosts its property. “In its emphatic use (...) it is applied to a closed scale predicate that is associated to a maximum of precision from which the emphatic effect of “muito” arises” (Sanchez-Mendes, 2022, p.104). The derivation given by the author is the following:

(vii) Foi muito golpe.

It was really a coup.’

1. $\llbracket \textit{muito golpe} \rrbracket = \llbracket \textit{muito} \rrbracket (\llbracket \textit{golpe} \rrbracket)$
2. $\llbracket \textit{muito golpe} \rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d [G(d)(x) \wedge d \geq ds] (\lambda d \lambda x. \textit{coup}(x) \wedge \text{“precision}_{\textit{coup}}”(x) = d)$
3. $\llbracket \textit{muito golpe} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \exists d [\textit{coup}(x) \wedge \text{“precision}_{\textit{coup}}”(x) = d \wedge d = ds]$

The formula in (vii) (from Sanchez-Mendes, 2022, p.104) pictures “muito” as a modifier that applies to the gradable “golpe”, which is already seated in a precision scale (underwent type shift already), but some degrees apart from the total resemblance with the prototype of the category, and changes the degree of resemblance to the maximum one, making the similarity irreproachable.

There is a parallel between the intensifier “muito” and the emphatic “muito”, by this proposal. The first is a booster that elevates the degree required for the truth of the gradable

predicate. As exemplified before, if 1,8 m as a degree of tallness suffices for most people to judge John “alto” “tall”, it may be not enough for John to qualify as “muito alto” “very tall”. In parallel, if a good amount of imprecision is allowed by “foi golpe” “it was a coup d’état”, a no imprecision at all is allowed by “foi muito golpe” “it was really a coup d’état”. So emphatic “muito” also boosts the degree, now a degree of similarity. However, there is a crucial distinction: while the product of intensifier “muito” (like “muito alto” “very tall”) is a gradable open scale expression, the product of emphatic “muito” (as in “muito golpe”) is a scale closed on the maximal degree. There is, “muito” is still a degree modifier, but, by this proposal, it does not always produce an open scale as the product of its modification. By Sanchez-Mendes (2022) proposal, the unified analysis of “muito” as a degree modifier s-selecting gradable expression and generating exclusively open scale expression does not hold.

After offering a precision scale account of emphatic “muito”, Sanchez-Mendes (2022) takes care of the derived pragmatic contend. Building up on Beltrama’s (2018) proposal for emphatic “totally”, the author bring about the common ground and the assertion operator. Since the licensing of emphatic “muito” does not require the strengthen of the speaker’s commitment that the contents in p need to be added at the common ground, but instead the speaker’s commitment to the truth of p , Gutzmann (2019) is also brought in the picture, to design two levels of analysis for the propositions (p): in a semantic level, a descriptive meaning; in the pragmatic level, an expressive meaning. Quoting the author:

This precision scale (...) is not enough to capture the notion of certainty that emphatic “muito” convey. (...) this pragmatic effect is explained by expressive attitude present in some intensifiers in natural languages. (Sanchez-Mendes, 2022, p.105)

She proposes that the descriptive meaning comes from “the precision scale derived from the type-shifting triggered by the intensifier” (Sanchez-Mendes, 2022, p 105), as in (12):

- (12) Foi muito golpe
'It was really a coup'
- a. Descriptive meaning: “It was a coup in its maximum precision interpretation.”
 - b. Expressive meaning: “The speaker is emotional and absolutely sure that it was a coup.”

Based on McCready (2010) analysis for mixed expressions, she arrives to a formalization:

- (viii) $\llbracket \text{muito} \rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \text{int}(G)(x) : \langle \langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle \blacklozenge \lambda G \lambda x. \text{emo}(G)(x) : \langle \langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle, \langle e, u \rangle \rangle$
- a. $\llbracket \text{int} \rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \text{there is a degree } d, \text{ such that } d \text{ meets the maximum standard given by the precision scale associated to } G \text{ and } x \text{ is } G \text{ to degree } d : \langle \langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$

- b. $\llbracket \text{emo} \rrbracket = \lambda G \lambda x. \text{the speaker is sure about the fact that there is a degree } d \text{ such that } d \text{ meets the maximum standard given by the precision scale associated to } G \text{ and } x \text{ is } G \text{ to degree } d : \langle \langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle, \langle e, u \rangle \rangle$

The representation of the expressive meaning on the right of the diamond in (viii) is based on a use-conditional (rather than the typical truth-condition on descriptive level). The expressive meaning ($\llbracket \text{emo} \rrbracket$) is a maximal emphasis on the truth of the proposition. The intensifier/emphatic meaning of “muito” is in this part ($\llbracket \text{int} \rrbracket$), and it is based on the type-shifting coerced by the precision scale. In both levels there is a maximal degree that is reached. So, the formula in (viii) thrives on the maximization of the semantic level, due to the precision scale associated to emphatic “muito”, and the need sensed by the speaker to a maximum commitment to the truth of the proposition.

The analysis has strong points. They go beyond the fact that it deals with a piece of data never before noticed by. Importantly, the proposal advances a twofold treatment to emphatic “muito”, in both semantic and pragmatic levels, with is well-come and commendable. On the way to achieve that, however, it in part demolishes the unified analysis of “muito”. “Muito” remains a degree modifier, even in the emphatic uses, by all accounts. But crucially, the analysis advanced by Sanchez-Mendes (2022) presents emphatic “muito” as a degree modifier that produces of a closed scale, closed on the maximum degree, while the intensifier “muito” remains a producer of an open scale in all the other uses.

In the next section, we follow the lead of Sanchez-Mendes (2022) in present an analysis for emphatic “muito”, both in a semantic and a pragmatic levels. We will take the burden of aiming to fully integrate our proposal with the unified analysis of “muito”, maintaining that emphatic “muito” is a degree operator and that it always produces an open scale, as the product of the modification operation.

2 An alternative analysis for emphatic “muito”³

The unified analysis of “muito” we will assume draws a distinction line between quantity scales (aspectual dimeson of action classes and nominal quantity) and quality scales (adjectives and inherent gradable lexical items, in the terms of Rett (2008), may they be verbs like “gostar” “to like” or nouns like “amor” “love”). Although “muito” modifies gradable expressions of many categories, the modifier is sensitive to the quality or quantity nature of the scale. In quality scales, there is no s-selection for a particular scale structure, which distinguishes “muito” of “very” regarding adjectival modification. While very s-selects open scales (according to Kennedy & McNally 2005), “muito” modifies totally closed scales (“muito cheio” “muito full”), partially closed scales (“muito sujo” “muito dirt”) as well as open scales “muito alto” “very tall”/ “very high”). However, in quantity scales, similarly to what was

³ I want to thank the audience of the Seventh Issues in Contemporary Semantics and Ontology (ICSO VII) - Trends in Semantics and Pragmatics for many insightful comments in a first draft of this proposal; especially, Andres Saab.

said of “very” in the adjectival domain, “muito” s-selects open scales, being unable to operate on closed scales:

- (13) *João chegou muito (accomplishment)
* John arrived MUITO

- (14) João correu muito (activity)
John ran MUITO
“John ran a lot” – he ran once for a long time (duration), he ran many times (frequency) in a period, he ran for a long way (distance), he ran very fast (velocity)

- (15) Ontem eu comprei (*muito) os livros que você me pediu. (a defined number of books)
* Yesterday I bought MUITO the books that we have asked me for

- (16) Ontem eu comprei muito(s) livro(s). (count nouns) (undefined quantity) (number)
Yesterday I bought MUITO book(s)
“Yesterday I bought many books” (undefined quantity)

- (17) Ontem eu comprei muito leite. (mass nouns) (undefined quantity) (volume)
Yesterday I bought MUITO milk
“Yesterday I bought much milk”

Taking the action classes of Vendler (1957) to be characterized by traces or properties like culminating or not, presenting duration or not, we get that “muito” can modify (in a single episode reading, one must put a part the iterating or frequency interpretations) only activities, never states⁴, accomplishments or achievements; “muito” operates on the dimension of measurable duration, but cannot operate on the dimension progression toward the culmination (cf. Gomes, Do Nascimento Gomes & de Souza, 2021). Taking the quantity interpretation of nominal phrases, “muito” can modify mass or count nouns, operating over both the dimensions of number and volume, but never on quantities closed on the maximal values, which amounts to the incompatibility of “muito” with argumental determiner phrases (see (15)), while “muito” is licensing with bare noun phrases (both with plural and singular, as we see in (16) and (17) (see Quadros Gomes & Delduque (2019) for details).

There is no space to go deeper into empirical support to the generalization here. In sum, “muito” s-selects for open scales in quantity scales but does not s-select for any scale structure in quality scales. Regardless this observation about the input, the output of modification by “muito” is always a (implicit) superiority comparison, that is, an open scale. The crucial point is that this generalization does not hold for emphatic “muito”, by Sanchez-Mendes proposal, since, by her account, as we have seen, emphatic “muito” saturates a maximal degree. Is there a approach for emphatic “muito” that fully preserves the generalization that “muito” is not only a degree modifier, but also that in all its possible uses

⁴ We are not talking about states construct with inherent gradable verbs, like “gostar”. Consider examples without degree words such as * “Lia está muito deitada” (*“Lia is MUITO lying down”).

modification by “muito” generates a (implicit) superiority comparison? Let us see. Let us consider the empirical data.

We have already shown that not all nouns undergo the type shift proposed by Sanchez Mendes (see examples (9)). Up to now, the lack of explanation about what nouns can and what nouns cannot sit in a precision scale is a shortcoming of the type shifting proposal. We will not advance an idea that allows us to predict if any noun can or cannot type shift. Instead, we will show that the type shifting of the noun is not worth anyway, since emphatic “muito” is not modifying a noun in isolation, but is instead modifying an entire nominal sentence predicate. It escaped entirely from the type shifting analysis the fact that nouns in argumental position do not produce the emphasis reading of “muito”. The nouns “golpe” “coup d ‘etat” (e.g.6), “copa” “World Championship” (e.g.7), “greve” “strick” (e.g.8), as well as “carro” “car” in (e.g. 11), are all of them the nominal nucleus of sentential predicates. Therefore, emphatic “muito” is not produced by the modification of such and such type of noun, but instead by the modification of a sentence predicate. Portuguese is a pro-drop language and still licenses null subjects. The whole structure (with the subjects pronounced) of the data attesting the existence of emphasis “muito” is the following:

- (18) a. Isso foi MUITO golpe! (= e.g.(6))
b. MUITO [Isso foi golpe]
c. MUITO [This was a coup d ‘etat]
- (19) a. Vai ter MUITA Copa no Brasil, gente! (= e.g.(7))
b. MUITO [No Brasil vai ter Copa, gente]]
c. MUITO [Brazil is the place of the World Championship, people!]
- (20) a. Tá tendo MUITO greve sim! (= e.g.(8))
b. MUITO [está tendo greve sim!]
c. MUITO [What is happening is positively a strike]
- (21) a. O Opala é MUITO carro! (= e.g.(11))
b. MUITO [Opala é o carro!]
c. MUITO [Opala is the car!] (Opala is a car by excellence)

Lines (b) and (c) on examples from (18) to (21) show what “muito” operates on. The degree modifier does not operate on nouns after all; “muito” modifies the entire proposition. So it does not make sense to resource to type shifting, since in fact no modification of nouns (gradable or non-gradable) takes place. The problem now is to explain how a whole proposition can be seen as a gradable expression.

A second observation that remained completely unnoticed on the type shifting approach concerns a pattern that arises for all those sentences. First, the (auxiliary) verb in all sentences with emphatic “muito” is always the verb “ser” “to be” or “ter” “there to be”. And it is never the predicative “to be”, which includes the subject in a set of objects sharing a property, as in “This flower is white”. Sentences hosting emphatic “muito” always have the equative “to be”, as in “Donald Trump is the actual president of USA”. Example (20) has a flavor of an existential sentence, relating an specific event to the place it happens in a way of calling the attention of the addressee to the existence or presence of such an event at the

mentioned place. Interesting, sentence (20) is finished by a confirmative tag, “sim” “yes”. Crucially, all those sentences, from (18) to (21), are affirmative, never negative. Also, all of them are (or at least could be) ended by an exclamative tag. Those facts are relevant because they establish that emphatic “muito” cannot operate over any proposition but only takes propositions of the proper kind.

A third feature of the propositions that license emphatic “muito” is that “muito” is always focused. We already accompanied the literature on representing the typical pronunciation or salient intonation of focused expressions by capital letters for the (a) sentences from examples (18) to (21). Please note what the choice for uppercase means in those lines: it means that there is focus on emphatic “muito”.

Why emphatic “muito” is focused? Why does it modify the whole proposition? Why exclamations? Why is it typical of the propositions modified by “muito” to be equative or existential? Those questions will be addressed right now.

Sentences with equative “ser” “to be” have the confirmation (or emphatic affirmation) flavor identified by Sanchez Mendes by her translations using “really” (“It was really a coup d’état”, “The World Championship will really be in Brazil”, “The strike is really happening”, respectively for examples (18), (19) and (20); she did not bring about (21), but this one can also be paraphrased in the same fashion: “Opala is really the [best/dream] car!”) The second nominal in those equative constructions represents a prototypical exemplar of the category⁵. As intuited by Sanchez Mendes, “muito” emphasizes the identification between the prototypical exemplar of a category and the subject, by reinforcing the whole proposition. The examples in (22) illustrates that emphatic “muito” must be part of the sentential predicate; it can never be inside the argument:

- (22) a. Ele recebeu muito golpe na cabeça!
He received a lot of blows on the head!
- b. Aplicam muito golpe por aí!
People apply many scams out there.
- c. (Isso) Foi golpe, foi MUITO golpe, não só contra a Presidenta Dilma Rousseff, mas principalmente contra a nossa democracia.
It was a coup d’état, it was REALLY a coup, not only against Dilma, but also against democracy.

No “precision scale” arises if “muito” is in argumental position. We only get the classic degree boost interpretation: “He received/people apply more blows /scams than I would guess” (22a/22b). Only in (22c), with “muito” integrated into the sentential predicate, the emphatic reading arises. Besides, emphatic “muito” is always focused (sometimes even

⁵ The plain existential/ presentational type of sentences, like “There will be the World Cup (in Brazil)” calls the attention of the addressee for an outstanding presence (s)he did not perceive yet, the presence of the Championship event. The emphasized version, “There will be MUITO the World Cup (in Brazil), of course!”, stresses this presentational function of the sentence, aiming to extinguish any doubts about the realization of the World Cup in Brazil.

written with capital letters, but always pronounced with emphasis, even with the prolongation of the first vowel: “muuuuuuuuuito”...).

The lexical entry of the focus feature must depend on the type of phrase it is attached to. (Sauerland, 2005). If emphatic “muito” targets a Noun Phrase, we would still need to distinguish what nouns could type-shift from non-gradable to gradable to allow for intensification. Maybe one could even say that evaluative designators (nouns) may be appreciated through a precision scale. However, in face of the fact that emphatic “muito” targets a proposition, a sentential equative predicate, we need to pursue a different path.

In line with Sanchez-Mendes (2022), we will assume that the stress on the pronunciation of emphatic “muito” is the manifestation of VERUM focus. Differently from her, we will assume that the use of VERUM out of the blue is blocked. VERUM focus can only arise when *p* conflicts with an interlocutor’s epistemic/ believe state, or when the speaker’s evidence for *p* is not strong enough to satisfy Gricean Quality (cf. Romero & Han’s 2004).

We have observed earlier that the source of the examples of emphatic “muito” brought about by Sanchez-Mendes (2022) is the media: newspapers, and social media as Instagram, WhatsApp etc. They surfaced at times of polarization in a hot debate between representants of distinct political alignments. There was no consensus at all about those issues. As for (21), it is not hard to imagine a dissensus about what is the best model of all time. Polemizing is essential to license VERUM focus. There may not be an explicit question or an immediate declaration with the opposite truth value when the proposition is issued, but a known controversy may work as a trigger for the emphasis.

If we treat (21) in the VERUM focus framework, we get the same results:

- (23) Is Opala the exemplification of an excellent/ ideal car?
 Yes, it is.
 No, it is not.

Sentences with emphatic “muito” are exclamatives. Adding the expressive contribution of the exclamation, we will propose that emphatic “muito” targets the truth value of the sentence, throughout marking an equality BE predicate. The Exclamative Component adds expressivity. If exclamative are factive, involving presupposition (Grimshaw, 1979), we get (24) from (23):

- (24) a. Opala é MUITO carro!
 b. Opala is (very) close to the ideal car.
 c. FOCUS: The affirmative truth value of (i) (in 23) is far more likely than the alternative.

By uttering (24a), the speaker says that (i) is much more accurate and motivated than (ii), with is equivalent do say that “Opala is closer to the ideal model than the average car/any other car”

Focus signals the contrast between the utterance and the false alternative. VERUM focus emphasizes a truth value (Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró 2011, 160). Epistemic/ believe/ political bias can be characterized as a speaker belief that the answer with the opposite polarity from the one he heard/ read in the media is true. Focus requires a contrastive target.

(25) Truth alternatives:
Foi golpe. p
Não foi golpe. $\neg p$

(26) A: Não foi golpe (It was not a coup d'état)
B: (*pro*) Foi [MUUUUITO]-F golpe!

In (25) we characterize the VERUM focus licensing polarization. In (26) we characterize the debate between two opposite opinionators. After being aware of people defending position A in the media, B emphasizes the truth of the proposition that it was a coup d'état by using emphatic “muito”. By doing so, Speaker B conveys that (s)he strongly believes that it was a coup de état and also that this should be consensual and obvious.

The VERUM operator received various formal interpretations in later works, as a modifier akin to “really” (Romero & Han 2002). VERUM(p) goes beyond a regular assertion of p by making explicit reference to the speaker’s epistemic state / believe and conversational goals, thus insisting on the truth of p . (Romero & Han, 2024).

“Using focus to signal that your assertion of p contrasts with the focal target $\neg p$ while also entailing that it is false produces the intuition that the truth of p is emphasized.” (Richter1993, 18).

Instead of treating emphatic “muito” as a max marker on a precision scale, we propose that the intensification goes over the truth value emphasis contributed by the VERUM focus. The best paraphrase for (26B) is not “It was as a coup d’état as it gets to be”, but “the judgment that “It is a coup d’état” as true is much more accurate and motivated than you could know!” The comparison holds between a polarized judgment of the proposition, as truth or false. The truth confirmation wins the dispute by large and is emphatically embraced. The semantics produced by emphatic “muito” with VERUM focus reads as: p is a much better alternative than $\neg p$! So, it is a superiority comparison after all!

Emphatic “muito” is triggered by the conjunction of three grammatical factors: (i) “muito” must be inside an equality BE predicate; (ii) “muito” must be focused; (iii) the sentence must be an exclamation.

Exclamatives involve descriptive and implicated contents. The descriptive one divides the worlds from the context set into possible and not possible, just in case the proposition is

accepted by the audience (cf. Castroviejo Miró). However, the VERUM Focus marking is a resource triggered by an evident absence of consensus about the truth value of the sentence. The (surprising) lack of agreement is precisely the stimulus the speaker wants to reply to by using the exclamation containing emphatic “muito”.

The utterance of an exclamative sentence p means that the context is biased towards p ; the addressee can only ratify p i.e., is forced to accept p . Castroviejo (2016) propose that exclamatives include descriptive contents that the speaker takes for granted and an implicated content that is described as an emotional attitude towards a degree. So, the exclamation may be analyzed as a degree expression by itself. The speaker’s attitude (his surprise and indignation) goes towards people that do not recognize the truth of the descriptive content, with is extremely obvious to him/her.

(27) (pro) É muuuito golpe!
‘It is really a coup d’état!’

a. Fact: $\exists e \wedge p(e) = \exists e [events-of-january-8th(e) \wedge MUITO (events-of-january-8th(e) \wedge a \text{ coup d’état } (e)(di)) =$

Where:

(i) $[[MUITO(dS)(dR)]] = 1$ iff $dS \geq dR$

(ii) $dS = di$

(iii) di is a degree recovered from context that is high.

b. Contribution: the speaker experiences an attitude towards $\wedge MUITO (p)(di)$ the insertion in a predicate and VERUM focus assign p as the operation domain of *muito*

Degree modifiers like “muito” boost the degree of the modified expression buy triggering a superiority implicit comparison. The modified expression must be gradable to stand as the first parameter of a superiority comparison. In association with VERUM FOCUS and EXPRESSIVE EXCLAMATIVES, we get emphatic “muito”. Expressives are a rich source of information about shared knowledge, beliefs, and so on (cf. Potts, 2003). Emphatic “muito” promotes a comparison between the truth alternatives for the sentence and asserts that the affirmative one is far more accurate than the negative, based on epistemic/believe states of the speaker. The speaker is saying that p is in common ground in all worlds compatible with the conversational goals, given her epistemic/believe state. Therefore, it is astonishing if anybody does not agree that p . The pragmatic effects are confirmation effects. We can still maintain a unified analysis for “muito”: it always contributes an implicit superiority comparison, never a closed scale.

3 Final Remarks

The piece of data brought about by Sanchez Mendes (2022) made the so-called emphatic “muito” outstand as apparently untreatable by the unified analysis of “muito” as a generator of open scales anytime a gradable expression was modified by it. Sanchez Mendes (2022) pursued a way of maintaining that in all its occurrences, including in the emphatic use, “muito” could only operate on gradable predicates. Nevertheless, modification by emphatic “muito” produces a maximal degree reading (a closed scale) in her account.

It was undesirable that some use of “muito” would scape the generalization that holds for every other one. Apart from that, the facts needed strong review. Since emphatic “muito” cannot be licensed inside argumental noun phrases, but only sits in a sentential nominal predicate, a type-shifting approach does not give us anything, because emphatic “muito” does not operate on nouns, but only on entire propositions. Therefore, we have pursued a distinct path. We proposed that emphatic “muito” is triggered by the conjunction of three grammatical factors: (i) “muito” must be inside an equality BE predicate (a type of similarity comparison construction); (ii) “muito” must be focused (a sign of VERUM focus); and (iii) the sentence must be an exclamation (for expressiveness). Expressives are a rich source of information about shared knowledge, beliefs, and so on (cf. Potts 2003). VERUM Focus marking is a resource triggered by an evident absence of consensus about the truth value of the sentence (like hot debate in the media). The (surprising) lack of agreement is precisely the stimulus the speaker wants to reply to by using the exclamation containing emphatic “muito”. The speaker’s attitude (his surprise and indignation) goes towards people that do not recognize the truth of the descriptive content, with is extremely obvious for him/her. VERUM focus strongly confirms the truth of the proposition. By employing emphatic “muito”, the speaker reinforces the truth of the proposition and conveys that (s)he strongly believes that it should be consensual and obvious.

Because VERUM focus compares both possible truth values for the proposition, it provides a gradable field for a degree modifier operation. Comparisons are gradable expressions, so emphatic “muito” is still modifying a gradable expression. It marks a bias of the speaker towards one of the two polar options (the same proposition cannot be both true and false in a given situation), the commitment with the truth (not the falseness) of the proposition. Emphatic “muito” promotes a comparison between the truth alternatives for the sentence and asserts that the affirmative one is far more accurate than the negative, based on epistemic/believe states of the speaker. As a consequence, any sentence with emphatic “muito” can be paraphrase as ***p*** is more likely than **$\neg p$** ! So emphatic “muito” produces a superiority implicit comparison after all!

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Declaração de disponibilidade de dados da pesquisa

Todo o conjunto de dados de apoio aos resultados deste estudo foi publicado no próprio artigo.

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