

# Ignorance and attenuation

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## Abstract

We introduce the existential modifier *cumva* in Romanian, which is ambiguous between a manner adverbial and an attenuating modifier. We describe its distribution and interpretation in declaratives and show that *cumva* has two possible meaning contributions, depending on the element it modifies: (i) ignorance, when it acts as a manner adverb, and (ii) attenuation, when it combines with a gradable predicate.

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we introduce the existential element *cumva* in Romanian. Descriptively, there are two distinct uses of *cumva* in declaratives. The first use is that of a manner adverbial with a non-specific interpretation, akin to *somehow*, illustrated in (1):

- (1) a. Rezolv asta *cumva*.  
solve.1SG this CUMVA  
‘I’ll solve this somehow.’  
b. Găsește el *cumva* cazare, nu-i problemă.  
finds he CUMVA accommodation not-is problem  
‘He’ll find a place to stay somehow, don’t worry.’

This use is expected given its morphological decomposition. Specifically, like other existential quantifiers in the language, *cumva* is built off of the manner *wh*-word *cum* ‘how’ and the suffix *-va* (for details on *wh*-based paradigms and constructions in Romanian, see e.g., Farkas 2013; Fălăuș and Nicolae 2022; Caponigro and Fălăuș 2023).

On its second use, illustrated in (2), *cumva* acts as an attenuator, akin to *somewhat*. It conveys a moderate degree of the property with which it combines, e.g., tiredness in (2-a).

- (2) a. Sunt *cumva* obosită.  
am CUMVA tired  
‘I’m somewhat tired.’  
b. Situația e *cumva* mai complicată decât credeam.  
situation is CUMVA more complicated than thought.1sg  
‘The situation is somewhat more complicated than I thought.’

Our main goal in this paper is to provide a detailed description of the two uses in (1) and (2) and understand the meaning contribution of *cumva*. We will show that the presence *cumva* associates with different pragmatic inferences. The nature of the observed inference correlates with its use: ignorance when it is used as a manner adverb (Section 3.1) and attenuation when combining with an adjective (Section 3.2). We also discuss ways in which these interpretations can be derived.

## 2 The distribution and interpretation of *cumva*

In this section, we describe in more detail the distribution and interpretation of *cumva* in each of the two uses mentioned above.

### 2.1 Manner adverbial use

On its manner adverbial use, *cumva* typically follows the verb, as in (1) above. In these examples, it can be replaced with other manner adverbs like *repede* ‘quickly’. *Cumva* can also occur elsewhere in the sentence, like other adverbials in Romanian, a language with a relatively free word order:

- (3) a. *Cumva* a aflat cine l-a dat de gol.  
CUMVA has found out who him-has given away  
‘Somehow, he found out who gave him away.’  
b. Mama *cumva* ştie mereu ce să zică.  
mom CUMVA knows always what SUBJ say  
‘Somehow Mom always knows what to say.’

Intuitively, the presence of *cumva* signals that the speaker is unwilling or unable to be specific about the manner in which the action under discussion will be carried out. It is quite common to find continuations that make this ignorance component explicit, as illustrated in (4-a). On the other hand, ignorance renders *cumva* incompatible with *namely* continuations, which explicitly identify the manner in question (4-b):

- (4) a. *Cumva*, nu ştiu cum, a aflat cine l-a dat de gol.  
CUMVA not know.1SG how has found out who him-has given away  
‘Somehow, I don’t know how, he found out who gave him away.’  
b. Rezolv asta *cumva*, #şi anume cu bani.  
solve I CUMVA and namely with money  
‘I’ll solve this somehow, #namely with money.’

### 2.2 Degree modifier use

On its degree modifier use, *cumva* typically combines with adjectives like *tired* or *complicated*, as shown in (2) above. It can also combine with other property-denoting expressions, i.e., adverbs, PPs and nouns.<sup>1</sup>

- (5) a. Lucrurile arată *cumva* mai bine ca ieri.  
things look CUMVA more well than yesterday  
‘Things are looking somewhat better than yesterday.’  
b. Marius a fost mereu *cumva* de partea mea.  
Marius has been always CUMVA on side my  
‘Marius has always been somewhat/sort of on my side.’  
c. Mai nou suntem *cumva* prieteni.  
more new are.1PL CUMVA friends  
‘Lately we have been somewhat/sort of friends.’

Intuitively, with gradable adjectives like *tired*, it conveys a moderate degree of the property with which it combines. This renders *cumva*-sentences incompatible with contexts favoring high degree interpretations. For example, the sentence in (6) cannot be felicitously followed by the

<sup>1</sup>In this use, *cumva* can be interchanged with the degree modifier *oarecum* ‘somewhat/sort of’, to convey the same meaning. Interestingly, *oarecum* cannot be used adverbially, unlike *cumva* (see Section 2.1 above).

continuation in (7-a), which suggests a high degree of difficulty. Note, crucially, that it also appears to convey the same meaning as the bare form without *cumva*, namely that the problem is difficult, as evidenced by the unacceptability of the continuation in (7-b).

- (6) Problema asta e *cumva* dificilă.  
 problem.def this is CUMVA difficult  
 ‘This problem is somewhat difficult.’
- (7) a. #*it’s impossible to solve.*  
 b. #*I’ll solve it in no time.*

In the case of non-gradable expressions, like *friends* in (5-c), *cumva* does not signal moderate degree, but rather a property that is related or similar in some relevant sense to that of being friends. English *sorta* and *kinda* are better approximations of that interpretation. Similar uses are provided by the examples in (8). In the following section we will argue that this approximation use can be viewed on a par with the attenuation use described above.

- (8) a. Schimbarea asta e *cumva* ilegală.  
 change.DEF this is CUMVA illegal  
 ‘This change is kind of illegal.’
- b. Bateria e *cumva* moartă.  
 battery.DEF is CUMVA dead  
 ‘The battery is kind of dead.’
- c. Chiar dacă erai singur, casa era *cumva* vie.  
 even if were alone, house.DEF was CUMVA alive  
 ‘Even though you were alone, the house was kind of alive.’

### 3 Deriving the different interpretations

In this section we focus on the meaning contributions associated with the uses of *cumva* outlined in the previous section and discuss in more detail their common interpretive components.

#### 3.1 Ignorance use

Possibly most straightforward of its uses is when it acts as a manner adverbial, as in (1) and (3), in which ignorance or indifference about the manner associated with the relevant action is conveyed. In this use, the contribution of *cumva* aligns with what one might expect from a regular existential quantifier. This effect arises via the usual Gricean reasoning over a more informative alternative, that the speaker chose not to employ, either because they don’t know or because the alternative is irrelevant for the purposes of the conversation. For instance, in (1-b), the speaker could have specified ways in which the person under discussion can find accommodation: *booking a place to stay, asking a friend, couch surfing* etc. Since none of these alternatives was employed, it is reasonable to conclude they may be false or not relevant.

In the case of an existential quantifier such as *somebody*, this ignorance or indifference effect is optional. This is evidenced by the fact that a sentence like *Somebody called.* allows a specific interpretation of the existential and thus can be felicitously followed-up by *namely John* (see Aloni and Degano 2022 for recent discussion). Adverbials like *cumva* or *somehow* are different in this respect, as they disallow continuations that signal knowledge (as shown in (4-b) above). Where does this difference come from? We believe that the obligatory ignorance effect observed with *cumva* is due to the fact that it is an adjunct, which by definition is optional. Truth-conditionally, there is no difference between (1-a) (*I’ll solve this somehow*) and its version

without *cumva* (i.e. *I'll solve this*).<sup>2</sup> General conversational principles prevent such uses, so its insertion must be associated with some meaning contribution. The actual meaning effect depends on the context. In some cases, the manner in which an action will be carried out may be left unspecified because the speaker is ignorant with respect to it. In other cases, it may be because it is irrelevant in the context. The sentences in (1) for example are compatible with both continuations in (9):

- (9) a. *I don't know how.*  
b. *Let's not get into the details.*

One can also find cases where *cumva* conveys ignorance with respect to the reason why a certain situation holds, as in (10):

- (10) *Cumva* mă îndoiesc că e o veste bună.  
CUMVA me doubt.1SG that is a news good  
'Somehow/For some reason, I doubt this is good news.'

This may be due to the fact that in addition to manner, the *wh*-word *cum* 'how' can also refer to reasons (much like in *how come*-interrogatives in English).

## 3.2 Attenuator use

### 3.2.1 Gradable adjective modifier

In most instances where *cumva* acts as an adjectival modifier, as in (2) and (6), it acts specifically as a moderate degree modifier, similarly to English *somewhat*. The interpretation that results is equivalent to that of the bare adjective, as argued by Solt and Wilson 2021 for *somewhat* (see the discussion around examples (6) and (7-b) above). Adopting their semantics of *somewhat*, we take *cumva* to be a degree quantifier that introduces existential quantification over a scalar interval. The resulting interpretation is equivalent to that of the bare adjective, namely that there is a non-zero degree to which the relevant property holds. However, *somewhat* and in turn, Romanian *cumva*, do make a contribution, namely one of attenuation of the degree in question.

Solt and Wilson 2021 propose that the attenuator use of a moderate degree modifier like *somewhat* can be analyzed as arising via competition with an alternative proposition containing a modifier expressing a higher degree, e.g., *foarte* 'very' as in (11). Specifically, the use of (2-a) conveys that the alternative in (11) is not true. Under the assumption that a more complex form, namely one with *somewhat* or *cumva*, should not be used if it does not make any contribution beyond that of the bare counterpart in (12), the competition with the stronger modifier can be taken to be obligatory since it delivers a strengthened interpretation beyond that which is conveyed by the bare form.<sup>3</sup>

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| <p>(11) Sunt <i>foarte</i> obosită.<br/>am very tired<br/>'I'm very tired.'</p> | <p>(12) Sunt obosită.<br/>am tired<br/>'I'm tired.'</p> |
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Having discussed how the moderate degree contribution of *cumva* is derived when it acts as

<sup>2</sup>Something similar can be said about other existential adverbials, e.g., *I'll come by sometime next week* or *Maria lives somewhere downtown*, whose presence doesn't seem to have any truth-conditional meaning contribution.

<sup>3</sup>There are a number of ways this could be implemented. One possibility is via a form of the Manner Maxim, as proposed by Rett 2020 in the domain of degree modification. This is ultimately no different than the proposals made in the literature for polarity sensitivity items which take their distribution to be guided by a requirement that their use contribute strengthening; see, e.g., Chierchia 2013; Nicolae 2012; Spector 2014; Nicolae 2017 among many others. Note, crucially, that such an account carries the assumption that the bare form does not have as an alternative a structurally more complex alternative involving a high-degree modifier (Katzir 2007).

a gradable adjective modifier, we next turn to its contribution when it modifies non-gradable adjectives.

### 3.2.2 Non-gradable property modifier

We already introduced some such examples above in (5) where we showed that it can combine with prepositional phrases and nouns which are not inherently gradable. Other uses of *cumva* where it seems to associate with a non-gradable predicate were provided in (8). In this use, the role of *cumva* appears to be similar to that of *sorta/kinda* in English, and that is to indicate that the degree of precision in the context is close to the standard degree, namely the one associated with the bare form (Anderson 2013, building on the work of Morzycki 2011). Consider, for example, how Anderson 2013 implements this for *sorta*: (i) the modifier imposes a coercion of the sister predicate into something gradable, followed by (ii) a comparison between the modified predicate *sorta P* and the bare predicate *P* such that *sorta P* is associated with a degree close to the one associated with *P*.<sup>4</sup> Since the gradability is over degrees of precision, and since the bare form is assumed to be associated with the highest such degree, it follows from the steps outlined above that the use of *sorta* would be associated with a close yet lower degree of precision.

While maintaining the spirit of his proposal, here we would like to argue for an account more closely aligned to the one presented above for the attenuator uses of *cumva*. Specifically, we want to argue that while *cumva*, like *sorta*, can coerce its sister property into something gradable, once it does so it enters into a competition not with the bare form, as proposed by Anderson 2013, but rather with another modified form, namely one involving a high degree modifier. For example, taking (8-a) as an example, we propose that the relevant competitor is (13).

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| <p>(13) Schimbarea asta e <i>complet</i> ilegală.<br/> change.DEF this is completely illegal<br/> ‘This change is completely illegal.’</p> | <p>(14) Schimbarea asta e ilegală.<br/> change.DEF this is illegal<br/> ‘This change is illegal.’</p> |
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Since on a non-coerced interpretation (14) amounts to (13), the same interpretation is achieved as in Anderson’s (2013) account, albeit via competition with a different alternative, as per Solt and Wilson’s (2021) account.

## 4 Conclusion and open issues

In this contribution we presented the distribution of the Romanian existential modifier *cumva* in declarative constructions. We showed that it can act as a modifier of nouns, adjectives, verbs and prepositional phrases. In discussing its distribution we also aimed to characterize the possible interpretations associated with it. We identified two main possible contributions, one of ignorance and another of attenuation, with the attenuation interpretation being characteristic of those contexts where a gradable predicate is available, directly or via coercion. The ignorance interpretation was shown to arise mostly in cases where *cumva* took on a manner-like interpretation. This characterization leaves open a number of issues, one major one being a unified theory of *cumva* that can predict its use depending on the nature of its argument. Specifically, we would like to better understand what it is about being a manner adverbial that is more likely to be associated with an ignorance interpretation than with an attenuation one. Note that we see a similar divide even in the use of the simple existential quantifier *some*, with it oscillating between conveying ignorance, (15-a), or a scalar inference, (15-b) (see for example Mihoc 2019 on what governs this divide).

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<sup>4</sup>Morzycki 2011, for example, argues for a covert typeshifter *PREC* which introduces gradability by creating different possible levels of (im)precision with respect to the relevant standard of comparison.

- (15) Ari read some books yesterday.  
 a.  $\rightsquigarrow$  *I don't know what books.*  
 b.  $\rightsquigarrow$  *She didn't read them all.*

There are also instances where *cumva* seems to act as a modifier at a higher level than what we discussed so far. Specifically, in examples like (16), *cumva* appears to do something other than convey ignorance with respect to the manner in which or reasons for why something takes place, unlike the uses of *cumva* in (1), (3) and (10).

- (16) a. *Cumva* lumea regretă ce s-a întâmplat.  
 CUMVA people.DEF regrets what REFL-has happened  
 'Somehow people regret what happened.'  
 b. *Cumva* banii nu aduc fericirea.  
 CUMVA money.DEF not bring happiness.DEF  
 'Somehow money doesn't bring happiness.'

Note crucially that ignorance-type continuations like those in (9) would not be felicitous in these examples, showing that the presence of *cumva* does not make the same contribution as in the other adverbial uses we discussed previously. Instead, *cumva* acts at the propositional level and its use signals that the proposition with which it combines is true in one, possibly non-standard, way of looking at things. By adding *cumva* in sentences like (16), *p* becomes true only by expanding the set of situations in which *p* is taken to be true. A similar effect would obtain in English with something like *in some sense*. Observe that this description of the interpretation strongly suggests a parallel account with the attenuation use of non-gradable predicates discussed previously: a deviation from the standard of precision in the examples in (8), and a deviation from the standard of interpretation in the examples in (16). Since this meaning is mostly evidenced by sentence-initial instances of *cumva* like in (16), this can be taken to further suggest that what is actually modified sits higher in the left periphery.

In fact, *cumva* is also found in polar questions, yet another instance where its contribution appears to be at the speech act level rather than lower in the clause. While we cannot pursue this use of *cumva* here, we nonetheless want to point out that its contribution, at least in these examples, can be seen as one involving attenuation as well, with the only difference being that the attenuation is at the level of the speaker's bias for the proposition highlighted by the question, namely that the addressee got a haircut in (17) and that it seems to be raining outside in (18).

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| <p>(17) Te-ai tuns <i>cumva</i>?<br/>         self-have hair-cut CUMVA<br/>         'Did you get a haircut?'</p> | <p>(18) Plouă <i>cumva</i>?<br/>         raining CUMVA<br/>         'Is it raining?'</p> |
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We are not aware of any work describing the use of *cumva* in questions. We leave open the discussion of what *cumva* contributes outside declaratives, but are hopeful that a possible integration of its uses across speech acts can ultimately be achieved.

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