

What is special about *special*?

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Abstract

This paper concerns the semantics of the adjective *special* as in *This is a special book about Stalingrad*. To the best of our knowledge no discussion of the semantics of *special* exists in the current literature. There is, however, some research on *(a)typical* which takes it to be a subsective, multidimensional and intensional adjective, involving comparison to stereotypes. We first hypothesize that *special* could be modeled as an antonym of *typical*, i.e. as *atypical*. We observe, however, that there are distributional and interpretational differences between *atypical* and *special*, and propose to capture them by taking *special* to involve non-stereotypical properties which hold of the individuals in question in the speaker's / protagonist's teleologically / bouletically accessible worlds.

1 Introduction

This paper concerns the semantics of the adjective *special* as in (1):

- (1) a. This is a special book about Stalingrad
- b. This is a special stone
- c. John is a special lawyer

To the best of our knowledge no discussion of the semantics of *special* exists in the current literature. There is, however, some research on *typical* which takes it to be a subsective, multidimensional and intensional adjective, involving comparison to stereotypes. We first hypothesize that *special* could be modeled as an antonym of *typical*, i.e. as *atypical*. We observe, however, that there are distributional and interpretational differences between *atypical* and *special*, and propose to capture them by taking *special* to involve non-stereotypical properties which hold of the individuals in question in the worlds speaker's / protagonist's wishes (in a wide sense of the term) are fulfilled.

2 Background: The semantics of *(a)typical*

Consider the adjectives *typical* and *atypical*, as in (1a):

- (2) a. John is a typical lawyer b. John is an atypical lawyer

We follow ideas in e.g. Sassoon (2012), McReady & Ogata (2007), del Pinal (2015, 2018) and Guerrini (2024), and take *(a)typical* to be an adjective which is non-

intersective/subsective, multidimensional and intensional. Let us look at each of these properties in turn.

First, unlike an adjective like *American*, the adjective (*a*)*typical* is not intersective:

- (3) a. Fido is a typical dog – NOT: Fido *is typical and Fido is a dog*
 b. Fido is an atypical dog – NOT: Fido *is an atypical and Fido is a dog*

Instead, both *typical* and *atypical* appear subsective. For example, in (4a) and (4b) the sets of typical / atypical labradors seem to be subsets of the set of dogs. This is illustrated by the following example (inspired by Guerrini (2024)):

- (4) A: That is a typical labrador. B: #No, it isn't a labrador!

In addition, unlike one-dimensional adjectives like *tall*, both *typical* and *atypical* are multidimensional (see e.g. Sassoon 2012, Bylina 2016, Solt 2018, D'Ambrosio & Hedden 2024). For example, John can be considered a typical lawyer (as well as an atypical lawyer) in various respects, e.g. the way he dresses to work, the number of hours he works, the amount of money he makes etc. Indeed, both *typical* and *atypical* can be modified by phrases like *in many / all respects*.

More specifically, Sassoon (2012) points out that in their positive form (as in (2a)) and (2b)), *typical* and *atypical* behave as conjunctive and disjunctive, respectively¹. That is, by default for (1a) to be true, John needs to be typical with respect to all relevant dimensions of being a lawyer, whereas for (1b) it is enough that John is atypical with respect to one such dimension. Sassoon supports this claim by observing that continuing such sentences with exceptive phrases, which are independently known to be compatible with universal quantifiers and not with existential ones, is perfectly felicitous with sentences like (2a), but is less common (and significantly less attested) with sentences like (2b):

- (4) a. John is a typical lawyer, except for the way he dresses
 b. John is an atypical lawyer, #except for the way he dresses

Finally, both *typical* and *atypical* are intensional. For example, for (3a,b) to be true it is not enough to consider just the properties of actual dogs. To illustrate that, consider the following scenario (inspired by an example from Cohen 1999). Suppose that it just so happens that all dogs existing right now have an identifying tag ending with an odd number. Then we will not consider (3a) to be true if Fido also happens to have such an identifying tag, and we will not consider (3b) false if it doesn't. Instead, following ideas in McReady and Ogata (2007), del Pinal (2015, 2018) and Guerrini (2024), we assume that to be considered a typical or an atypical dog we need to look into more inherent properties of dogs, and in particular, into their stereotypical properties.

To capture these properties, we follow Guerrini's (2024) proposal regarding *fake* (pace del Pinal's 2015, 2018 analysis in terms of Dual Content Semantics), and capture the intensionality of (*a*)*typical* by integrating into its semantics a generic

¹ Similarly to *healthy* and *ill*, respectively.

quantifier, which, we take to be a universal quantifier over individuals and accessible worlds. In the case of the case of *(a)typical* we assume that these worlds are those which are stereotypically accessible from the world of evaluation.

Integrating this with Sassoon's (2012) claims regarding the multidimensionality of *typical* and *atypical* we take the sentence in the positive form *John is a typical lawyer* (2a) to be true in w iff John is a lawyer in w and for all properties Q in all contextually relevant dimensions D such that in all stereotypically accessible worlds w' , lawyers have Q in w' , John has Q in w . Given this approach we can now take (2b) to indicate that there is at least one D where John does not share every property Q in D with stereotypical lawyers.²

Finally, we note that *typical* and *atypical* require the property they modify to be 'natural' (in Chierchia's 2013 terminology, to show a 'sufficiently regular behavior').³ We take this to be a presupposition, given the infelicity of *(a)typical* with 'unnatural properties' (5a), and the projection of this inference under e.g. *possible* (5b):

- (5) a. John is a(n) *(a)typical* {American / rich / ?162m tall} lawyer
 b. It is possible that John is a(n) *(a)typical* {American / rich / ?162m tall} lawyer

We propose to capture this observation by taking *(a)typical* to (minimally) presuppose that there is at least one dimension where there is at least one property Q that all P members have in all accessible worlds. We thus take the sentences in the positive forms *John is a(n) (a)typical lawyer* to be interpreted as in (6):

- (6) a. *John is a typical lawyer is defined* iff:
 $\exists D.C(D). \exists Q \in D. \forall x, w' [w'R_{sr}w \wedge x \text{ is a lawyer in } w'] \rightarrow Q(x)(w')$.
 When defined, it's true iff $\text{Lawyer}(j)(w) \wedge \forall D.C(D). \forall Q \in D. \forall x, w' [[w'R_{sr}w \wedge x \text{ is a lawyer in } w'] \rightarrow Q(x)(w')] \rightarrow Q(j)(w)$.
 b. *John is an atypical lawyer is defined* iff:
 $\exists D.C(D). \exists Q \in D. \forall x, w' [w'R_{sr}w \wedge x \text{ is a lawyer in } w'] \rightarrow Q(x)(w')$.
 When defined, it's true iff $\text{Lawyer}(j)(w) \wedge \neg \forall D.C(D). \forall Q \in D. \forall x, w' [[w'R_{sr}w \wedge x \text{ is a lawyer in } w'] \rightarrow Q(x)(w')] \rightarrow Q(j)(w)$.

3 Novel observations: *(A)typical* vs *special*

A reasonable hypothesis to entertain now is that *special* is the antonym of *typical*, and that it has the semantics of *atypical*, e.g. that (7b) is the same as (7a):

² These proposals may be oversimplistic compared to more sophisticated views which integrate quantification over dimensions, and / or weights of dimensions in different contexts (e.g. McReady & Ogata 2007 analysis of *typical*-like adjectives in Japanese, see also Sassoon 2012, Bylinina 2016, Solt 2018, D'Ambrosio & Hedden 2024). But at this stage the distinctions between these views is orthogonal to our main claims regarding the semantics of *special*.

³ Cf. McReady & Ogata (2007) for a similar observation for Japanese *typical*-like adjectives.

- (7) a. John is an atypical lawyer b. John is a special lawyer

Indeed, similarly to (*a*)*typical*, *special* is also subjective, multidimensional and intensional. In addition, it also appears to presuppose that its modified property is 'natural'. It pattern in the same way as (*a*)*typical* in (5a,b).

However, we can also observe at least four interpretational and distributional differences between *special* and (*a*)*typical*, which indicate that understanding the contribution of the former requires more thought.

Observation A: Unlike *atypical*, *special* feels 'subjective', and even experiential (cf. Bylina 2016, Solt 2018) as indicated by its felicity as a comparative as a complement to *find* (8a), and with the 'judge PPs' *to x* phrases (8b). This is unexpected if *special* had the semantics of *atypical*.

- (8) a. I find it more {special /[?]atypical}
b. This watch is {special /[?]atypical} to me

Observation B: Unlike *atypical*, *special* appears to have a 'positive' flavor (9):

- (9) Context: *The regular amount of cans made by a typical worker in this factory is around 100 per day. But Mary is very quick – she makes 250 per day. And John is very slow – he only makes 25 per day.*
a. {Mary/John} is an atypical worker b. {Mary/[?]John} is a special worker.

Again, this would be unexpected if *special* had the semantics of *atypical*.

Notice that 'positive' is used here in a very wide sense. In (10), for example, it reflects feelings of excitement or awe. This seems to distinguish *special* from more traditional adjectives which were characterized as 'evaluative' like *good*:

- (10) a. This is a special book! Newton himself held it and read it.
b. What makes this fossil special is that it is the first one which was discovered in America

Observation C: Related to the previous observations, we note that *typical* and *special* are completely independent, i.e. that there can be attested cases for any logically possible combination of values of *typical* and *special*. Suppose, for example, that stereotypical lawyers have the following properties, they: (i) dress formally to work, (ii) work many hours a day, (iii) charge a lot per hour, (iv) make lots of money and (v) are very sharp. Now consider the following combinations:

- (11) **+Typical +Special** – a lawyer which has all stereotypical properties but also has a 'positive' property not typical of lawyers e.g. she is the only one who won a prestigious prize for a contribution to the field;
+Typical -Special – A lawyer with all stereotypical properties, and who does not have any 'positive' property that makes her different from other stereotypical properties;
-Typical +Special – A lawyer who lacks stereotypical properties (e.g. does not work many hours a day), but who does not charge a lot (which is considered 'positive');

-Typical -Special – A lawyer who lacks stereotypical properties (e.g. does not make lots of money money), and does not have any 'positive' non-stereotypical property either.

Taking *atypical* to be the antonym of *typical*, would not predict this attested independence of *atypical* and *special*.

Observation D: With proper names *special* can easily appear in predicative position in 'out of the blue' contexts (12a), whereas *(a)typical* needs more contextual support (12b):

- (12) a. John is {special / ??(a)typical}!
 b. Context: *Lawyers are known to charge too much per hour*.
 But John is special / atypical!

4 Proposal

We propose that, like *John is a(n) (a)typical lawyer*, *John is a special lawyer* is defined iff its modified property is 'natural', i.e. if it meets the presuppositions in (6a) and (6b) above, and that part of its truth conditions is that John is a lawyer in the world of evaluation, *lawyer (j)(w)*. In addition, it requires that there is a property Q' that John has in w, which is a member of a contextually relevant dimension **D'.C(D')**, and which meets the two conditions in (13):

- (13) a. $\forall x, w' [w'R_{ster}w \wedge lawyer(x)(w')] \rightarrow \neg Q'(x)$
 b. $\forall x, w'' [w''R_j^{bouletic} w \wedge lawyer(x)(w'')] \rightarrow Q'(x)(w'')$

In prose, the property Q' which makes John 'a special lawyer' must meet two conditions. The first requires Q' to be a non-stereotypical property of lawyers, i.e. a property that no lawyer in the stereotypically accessible worlds has. This condition can be met in two scenarios. In the first Q' is non-stereotypical of lawyers because the dimension **D'** of which it is a member is itself not stereotypically associated with lawyers. This happens, for example, in the **+Typical +Special** condition above (11a), assuming that that winning a prize is not a dimension which holds of lawyers in stereotypically accessible worlds. A second scenario is illustrated in the **-Typical +Special** where the dimension **D'** is stereotypically associated with lawyers (e.g. charging a certain amount of money), but Q' is not (e.g. charging very little).

The second condition on Q' that all lawyers have this property Q' in all worlds which are accessible from w given the judge's perspective and an accessibility relation ***bouletic**. We take this accessibility relation to yield a set of worlds which are bouletically accessible from w in a wide sense, i.e. not only where concrete wishes of the judge are fulfilled, but also those where she experiences positive feelings.

5 Accounting for the observations

Observation A follows directly through component (10b) of our proposal given that the property which makes John special should hold in the worlds which are accessible from the point of view of the judge.

Component (10b) also can explain observation B regarding the 'positiveness' of *special*, given the characterization of the accessible worlds as bouletically accessible in a wide sense. Given this accessibility relation the property Q' that one should have in order to be considered a special P is a property that all P members have in the worlds where some concrete wishes of the judge are fulfilled (e.g. the wish for a high productivity of workers (as in (7)) but also in worlds where the judge feels excitement or awe (as in (8)).

Observation C is explained by the fact that given our proposal, the meanings of *special* and (*a*)*typical* do not stand in an entailment relation. More specifically, unlike *atypical* which conveys that x lacks stereotypical properties, to be *special* we need to add a non-stereotypical property which characterizes x, as seen in (10a). While in many cases the two operations lead to identical truth conditions (making *atypical* and *special* look synonymous), they are distinct due to (e.g. due to condition (10b) on *special*).

Finally, observation D can be explained in terms of informativity: With no contextual support we tend to take *John is (a)typical* to involve the very general modified property *PERSON*, i.e. to be interpreted as *John is a(n) (a)typical* person. However, the contribution of (*a*)*typical* in such a sentence seems to be trivial, since it is met with *John is a person* as well: Virtually every person has enough stereotypical properties of a human being (a person), hence being a *typical* person, and virtually every human individual is not 100% a stereotypical person, as every person must have certain properties that makes it unique, hence being an *atypical* person. This also explains why *John is (a)typical* is improved in contexts which support a more specific modified property (e.g. *lawyer*), where such inference is not trivially met. In contrast, given our proposal *John is (a) special (person)* is informative because it conveys that the speaker / protagonist takes John to have a particular non-stereotypical property, which is, furthermore considered 'positive'.

6 Conclusion

In this paper we provided a semantics for sentences with the adjective *special* in the positive form, and compared it to the adjective *atypical*, which, unlike *special*, has been already discussed in the formal semantics literature.

Our analysis supports analyzing the semantics of at least some multidimensional adjectives as making reference to stereotypical properties, and as involving modal quantification. At the same time, it shows that such multidimensional adjectives can differ from each other along at least two parameters: whether or not they are subjective, and in terms of the accessibility relations that restricts the modal quantification, e.g. just a stereotypical accessibility relation (as with (*a*)*typical*), or also in terms of a bouletic-like one (as with *typical*).

A more specific implication of our proposal concerns the semantics of sentences like (14), discussed in Greenberg (2023):

(14) This is (not) just another book about Stalingrad!

Greenberg argues that *just* in such cases associates with the focused *another*, and negates alternatives as in (15):

(15) This is a special book about Stalingrad.

Our analysis of *special* correctly explains Greenberg's observation that similarly to the sentence with *special*, a construction like (16) is degraded with 'unnatural properties':

(16) ??This is (not) just another book with 236 pages

As said above we focused in this paper on sentences with *special* in the positive form. In future research we would like to give a compositional analysis to such sentences, which will involve a lexical entry for *special*, and one for a covert *POS* degree modifiers for multidimensional adjectives (following ideas in Sassoon (2012), Greenberg ()). This will allow us to analyze also sentences with other degree modifiers, e.g. *John is a more special than Bill / John is a bit special*, etc.

7 References

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