

Gradable and ungradable adjectives

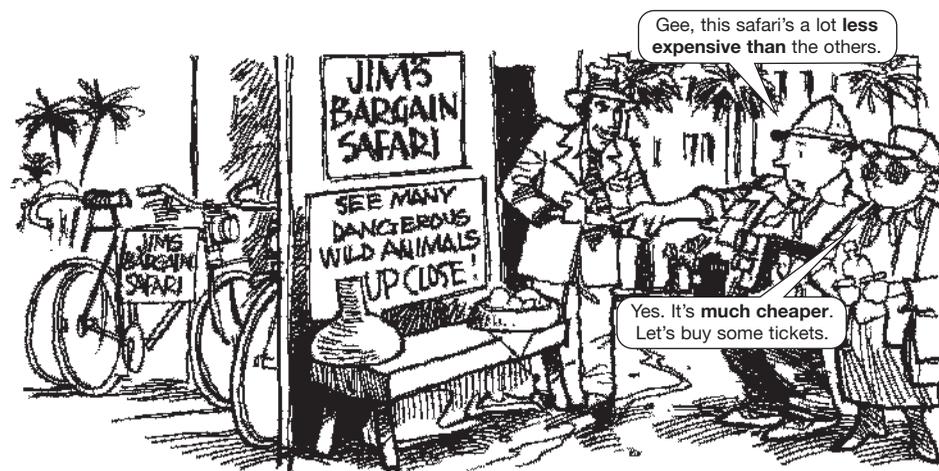
Adjectives are 'describing' words. Most adjectives have a meaning which can be made stronger or weaker; these are called 'gradable adjectives'. Other adjectives have a meaning which is extreme or absolute and cannot easily be made stronger or weaker. These are called 'ungradable adjectives'. The differences in the way we use these two kinds of adjectives can cause problems even for advanced students. This unit looks at these different types of adjective and the ways in which we can modify their meaning. (For adjective use in general ► **Unit 21**; for adjectives used in comparisons ► **Unit 22**.)

23.1 MODIFYING GRADABLE ADJECTIVES

23.1A Gradable and ungradable adjectives
Gradable adjectives represent a point on a scale. For example, *cheap* and *expensive* are adjectives on the scale of 'how much something costs'. Ungradable adjectives represent the limits of a scale (► **23.2A** below).

ungradable adjectives (limit of the scale)	<i>free</i>	<i>freezing</i>	<i>vast/enormous</i>
↑ gradable adjectives ↓	<i>(very cheap)</i> <i>cheap</i> <i>(not very cheap)</i> <i>(a bit expensive)</i> <i>expensive</i> <i>(very expensive)</i>	<i>cold</i> <i>hot</i>	<i>large</i> <i>small</i>
ungradable adjectives (limit of the scale)	<i>priceless</i>	<i>boiling</i>	<i>minutetiny</i>

We can make comparative and superlative forms from all gradable adjectives:



23.1B Strengthening the adjective
We can make gradable adjectives stronger with *very*, but not with the adverb *absolutely*:

- ✗ *That new jacket looks absolutely expensive.*
- ✓ *That new jacket looks very expensive.*

There are several other modifiers which we use to strengthen the meaning of these adjectives: *so*, *rather*, *really*, *extremely*, *terribly*, *most* (formal), *pretty* (informal):

*Last night's match was **terribly** exciting.*

*I felt **pretty** upset after the accident.* (informal)

*The chapter on the early sonnets was **most instructive**.* (formal)

We often use less common adverbs to modify certain gradable adjectives. Although *very* is commonly used to strengthen any adjective, your English will sound more fluent and natural if you learn to use other combinations of adverb and adjective:

*I was **bitterly disappointed** at my exam results.*

*My brother is **painfully shy**.*

*The students in this school are **highly intelligent**.*

Note that we can often only use certain adverbs with certain adjectives (for commonly used combinations ► **23.4**).

23.1C Weakening the adjective
Gradable adjectives can usually be made weaker by the words *fairly*, *slightly*, *a (little) bit* (informal) and *somewhat* (formal):

*I've been feeling **slightly dizzy** all morning.*

*My friend was **a bit drunk**.* (informal)

*The police reported that the man was **somewhat inebriated**.* (formal)

In conversation, *a bit* is a useful way to make a critical remark more polite:

*You're **a bit overdressed**, aren't you?*

We can use *not very* and *not at all* to weaken gradable adjectives after the verb *be*:

*The end of term test **wasn't very long** and it **wasn't at all difficult**.*

23.1D *quite*
With gradable adjectives *quite* usually means 'fairly' but can have other meanings. The different meanings are only apparent in spoken English as they are dependent on stress and intonation:

- The lecture was **quite interesting**.* (unmarked = fairly interesting)
- quite **interesting*** (stress on adjective = more interesting than the speaker expected)
- quite** interesting* (stress on adverb = less interesting than the speaker expected)

(For *quite* with ungradable adjectives ► **23.2B**.)

23.2 MODIFYING UNGRADABLE ADJECTIVES

23.2A Ungradable adjectives
Ungradable adjectives (e.g. *enormous*, *vast*, *tiny*, *priceless*, *free*) have a meaning which represents the limit of a scale. For example the limits of the scale of 'how much something costs' (► table in **23.1A**) are *free* (= it costs nothing) and *priceless* (= its cost is too great to be counted). Ungradable adjectives are not usually used in comparatives and superlatives (but ► **23.2D**), and we do not use *very* to make them stronger:

- ✗ *The Ming vases are **more priceless** than the Egyptian mummies.*
- ✓ *The Ming vases are **more valuable** than the Egyptian mummies.*
- ✗ *Entrance to the museum is **very free**.*
- ✓ *Entrance to the museum is **absolutely free**.*

23.2B Intensifying the adjective
A common way to intensify the meaning of ungradable adjectives is with the adverb *absolutely*. We use this device to add emphasis in spoken and informal English; it is not common in writing:

*I couldn't swim in the sea; the water was **absolutely freezing**.*

*The show was **absolutely fabulous**.*

When we use *quite* with ungradable adjectives, it has a similar meaning to 'completely', emphasising the strength of the adjective:

*The tenor's performance was **quite amazing**.*

*You're **quite correct**.*