

The Evaluative Binominal Construction in Dutch, English, French and Italian. A cross-linguistic corpus study

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Outline

1. The Evaluative Binominal Construction: state of the art
2. Research goal and questions
3. Data and method of analysis
4. Corpus results
5. Discussion and conclusions

The Evaluative Binominal Construction (EBC)

- **Examples:**

- DU *een schat van een kind* ‘a lovely child’ (lit. a treasure of a child)
- EN *a hell of a day*
- FR *cette saleté de médicament* ‘this dirty medication’ (lit. this dirt of medication)
- IT *quel tesoro di bambino* ‘that lovely child’ (lit. that treasure of child)

- **Structure:** [DET1 N1 PREP (DET2) N2]

- Semi-schematic construction
 - Only the preposition is fixed
 - All other slots are subject to variation

- **Non-compositional meaning:**

- “N2 showing to an extraordinary degree characteristic features of N1 (subjective-evaluative)” (translated from Verhagen 2005: 202)
 - N1 → extraordinary (physical or abstract) quality (metaphorical value)
 - N2 → entity to which this quality is attributed (referential head)

State of the art

- **Studies on single languages:**

- Dutch (a.o. Paardekooper 1956, Verhagen 2005, **Van Goethem 2023**)
- English (a.o. Aarts 1994, 1998, **ten Wolde 2023**)
- French (a.o. Regula 1965, Larrivée 1994)

- **Cross-linguistic studies:**

- Germanic and Romance languages (a.o. Foolen 2004)
- Romance languages (a.o. Tutescu 1969, **Piunno in press**)

→ red color = corpus-based studies

→ Corpus-based cross-linguistic studies are still scarce

Research goal & questions

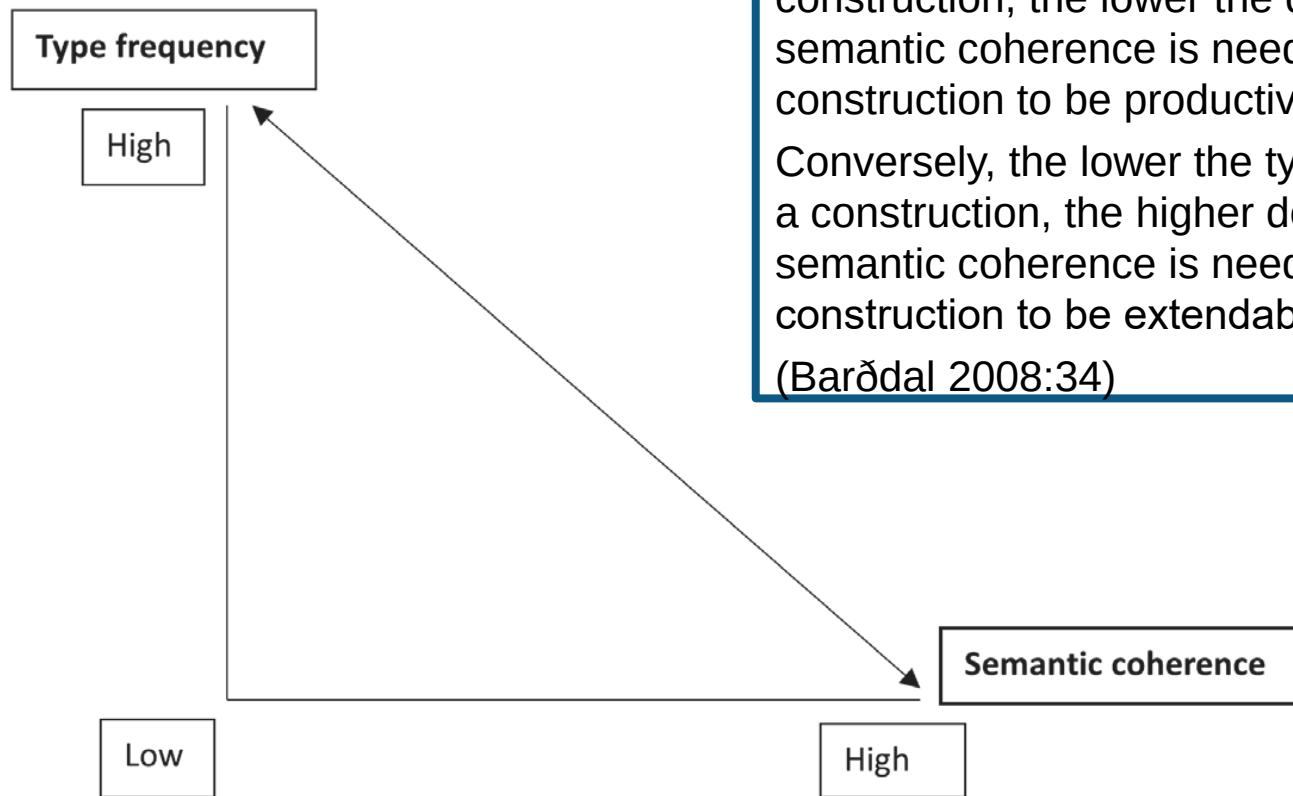
Research goal

- A corpus-based cross-linguistic constructionist analysis of the EBC (Dutch, English, French, Italian)

Research questions

- **RQ1:** What are the main **cross-linguistic similarities and differences** between the EBC in the four languages under study?
- **RQ2:** What is the relation between **productivity** and **semantic coherence** in the EBC in the four languages under study?
 - *semantic coherence*: internal consistency between the members of the schema (Barðdal 2008: 27)

Hypothesis: Inverse correlation between productivity and semantic coherence



“[...] the higher the type frequency of a construction, the lower the degree of semantic coherence is needed for a construction to be productive.

Conversely, the lower the type frequency of a construction, the higher degree of semantic coherence is needed for a construction to be extendable.”

(Barðdal 2008:34)

Barðdal (2008:35)

Corpus data

Sketch Engine: <https://www.sketchengine.eu>

- TenTen corpus family
- corpus data collected from the Internet

two Germanic languages (English and Dutch)

- | | | |
|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| • nlTenTen20 | (6,836,979,371 tokens) | June and July 2020 |
| • enTenTen21 | (52 billion words) | October–December 2021 |

two Romance languages (French and Italian)

- | | | |
|--------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| • frTenTen23 | (23.8 billion words) | 2022 and 2023 |
| • itTenTen20 | (14,514,566,714 tokens) | 2019 and 2020 |

Concordance function – CQL queries

Combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis

Data extraction

General analysis of the **top 20** EBC patterns per language

- General CQL Query:
 - e.g., English [word="a"] [tag = "noun.*"] [word="of"] [word="a"]
- Extract top 20 EBC patterns per language
- General analysis of frequency and semantic properties of top 20

Detailed analysis of the **top 5** EBC patterns per language

- More specific CQL query including N1 lemma
 - e.g., English [tag="det.*"]? [lemma="hell"] [lemma="of"]
 - Italian: [DET 1="quello|quel|questo|quella|quelle|quegli|quei|questi|queste"]
- Random samples of 1000 occurrences per subpattern
- Manual check until 100 relevant occurrences per pattern
- Final datasets of 5x 100 relevant occurrences per language
- = **2000 relevant occurrences in total**

Data annotation and analysis

- **Annotation in Excel in terms of:**
 - **Formal properties** (Det 1, Det 2, number, complexity N2)
 - **Evaluative semantics construction:** ameliorative, pejorative, augmentative, diminutive or combination
 - **Semantics N2:** person, animal, object, place, concept
 - **Lemma N2** ~ productivity scores: TTR, PP

RESULTS:

1. Cross-linguistic similarities and differences

Frequency: top 20

Dutch	English	French	Italian
<i>een dijk van een</i>	<i>a hell of a</i>	<i>ce/cette putain de</i>	<i>quel capolavoro di</i>
<i>een pracht van een</i>	<i>a heck of a</i>	<i>ce/cette drôle de</i>	<i>quel genio di</i>
<i>een schat van een</i>	<i>a gem of a</i>	<i>cette saloperie de</i>	<i>quel maiale di</i>
<i>een joekel van een</i>	<i>a whale of a</i>	<i>ce con de</i>	<i>quello schifo di</i>
<i>een draak van een</i>	<i>a beast of a</i>	<i>cette saleté de</i>	<i>quel pazzo di</i>
<i>een beest van een</i>	<i>a ghost of a</i>	<i>ce monstre de</i>	<i>quella merda di</i>
<i>een juweel van een</i>	<i>a monster of a</i>	<i>ce diable de</i>	<i>quell' amore di</i>
<i>een kanjer van een</i>	<i>a devil of a</i>	<i>ce salaud de</i>	<i>quell' idiota di</i>
<i>een droom van een</i>	<i>a mess of a</i>	<i>ce connard de</i>	<i>quel porco di</i>
<i>een parel van een</i>	<i>a cracker of a</i>	<i>ce bijou de</i>	<i>quel coglione di</i>
<i>een knaller van een</i>	<i>a steal of a</i>	<i>cet imbécile de</i>	<i>quel bastardo di</i>
<i>een dot van een</i>	<i>a jewel of a</i>	<i>ce fou de</i>	<i>quel diavolo di</i>
<i>een boom van een</i>	<i>a nightmare of a</i>	<i>cet idiot de</i>	<i>quel simpaticone di</i>
<i>een beer van een</i>	<i>a whirlwind of a</i>	<i>cet abruti de</i>	<i>quella schifezza di</i>
<i>een kast van een</i>	<i>a rollercoaster of a</i>	<i>ce joyau de</i>	<i>quell' inferno di</i>
<i>een monster van een</i>	<i>a mockery of a</i>	<i>cette connerie de</i>	<i>quella gioia di</i>
<i>een kei van een</i>	<i>a bitch of a</i>	<i>cette merde de</i>	<i>quel matto/mattacchione di</i>
<i>een wolk van een</i>	<i>a blast of a</i>	<i>cet enfoiré de</i>	<i>quel poveraccio di</i>
<i>een topper van een</i>	<i>a prince of a</i>	<i>cette salope de</i>	<i>quell' imbecille di</i>
<i>een reus van een</i>	<i>a rocket of a</i>	<i>ce cochon de</i>	<i>quel tesoro di</i>

Top 20: Semantics cxn

Dutch	English	French	Italian
een dijk van een	a hell of a	ce/cette putain de	quel capolavoro di
een pracht van een	a heck of a	ce/cette drôle de	quel genio di
een schat van een	a gem of a	cette saloperie de	quel maiale di
een joekel van een	a whale of a	ce con de	quello schifo di
een draak van een	a beast of a	cette saleté de	quel pazzo di
een beest van een	a ghost of a	ce monstre de	quella merda di
een juweel van een	a monster of a	ce diable de	quell'amore di
een kanjer van een	a devil of a	ce salaud de	quell' idiota di
een droom van een	a mess of a	ce connard de	quel porco di
een parel van een	a cracker of a	ce bijou de	quel coglione di
een knaller van een	a steal of a	cet imbécile de	quel bastardo di
een dot van een	a jewel of a	ce fou de	quel diavolo di
een boom van een	a nightmare of a	cet idiot de	quel simpaticone di
een beer van een	a whirlwind of a	cet abruti de	quella schifezza di
een kast van een	a rollercoaster of a	ce joyau de	quell' inferno di
een monster van een	a mockery of a	cette connerie de	quella gioia di
een kei van een	a bitch of a	cette merde de	quel matto/mattacchione di
een wolk van een	a blast of a	cet enfoiré de	quel poveraccio di
een topper van een	a prince of a	cette salope de	quell' imbecille di
een reus van een	a rocket of a	ce cochon de	quel tesoro di

Ameliorative

Pejorative

Augmentative

Diminutive

Evaluative semantics: summary

Dutch

- Mostly **ameliorative** and **augmentative** connotations
 - *een **pracht** van een kerstkaart* ‘a beauty of a Christmas card’
 - *een **joekel** van een auto* ‘a huge car’ (lit. a whopper of a car)

English

- Mix of **pejorative** and **ameliorative** values:
 - *a **hell** of a job*
 - *a **gem** of a book*

French / Italian

- Clearly more **negative** connotations + **informal** language
 - FR *la **putain** de patrie* ‘that fucking fatherland’
 - IT *quello **schifo** di città* ‘that disgusting city’
- **Mirative** value of *drôle* (expressing surprise)
 - FR *Quelle **drôle** d’idée* ‘what a crazy idea’

Formal properties: general tendencies

DET 1

- Wide variation in DET1 position in Germanic:
 - DU **vier** *schatten van kleinkinderen* ‘four darlings of grandchildren’
 - ENG **my** *hell of a house*
- Preference for a demonstrative/exclamative in Romance
 - FR **ces** *saletés de laveurs de vitres* ‘those filthy window cleaners’
 - IT **quell** *amore di bambino* ‘that lovely child’

DET 2

- Indefinite article or absent in Germanic (e.g., *an absolute whale of time*)
- Less frequently present in Romance

N1

- often nominalized adjective in the Romance languages
 - FR *quel(le)* **drôle** *de N*
 - IT *quell* **idiota** *di N*

N2

- not only simplex nouns, also compounds and NP
 - FR *ces saloperies de* **toilettes turques** ‘these dirty Turkish toilets’
 - DU *een schat van een* **Engelse nanny** ‘a sweetheart of an English nanny’

Formal properties: special cases

Number agreement

- Construction mostly used in the singular, but also plural forms when N1 is a countable noun
 - IT *queste **meraviglie** di **cioccolatini*** ‘these wonders of chocolates’
- Marginal cases of disagreement in number between N1 and N2:
 - DU *twee **pracht** van **kinderen*** ‘two wonderful children’

Diminutive forms of N1

- DU *een **schatje** van een hond* ‘a cutie of a dog’

Adjectival modification of N1

- DU *mijn **lieve** schat van een poes* ‘my sweet darling of a cat’
- FR *un **sacré** putain de bordel* ‘a hell of a fucking mess’

RESULTS:

2. Relation between productivity and semantic coherence

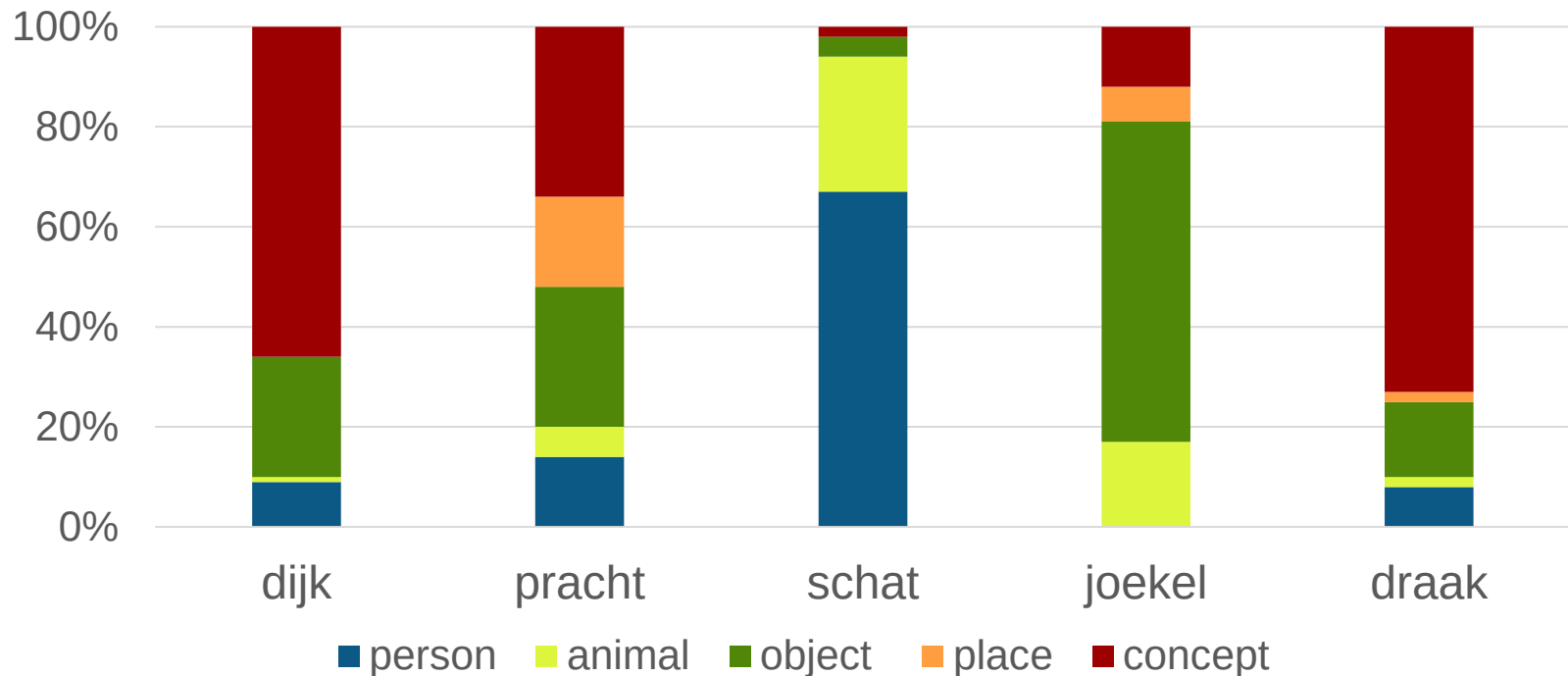
Top 5 most frequent N1

Top 5	Dutch	English	French	Italian
1.	<i>dijk</i> 'dike'	<i>hell</i>	<i>putain</i> 'lit. whore'	<i>capolavoro</i> 'masterpiece'
2.	<i>pracht</i> 'splendor'	<i>heck</i>	<i>drôle</i> 'funny, strange'	<i>genio</i> 'genius'
3.	<i>schat</i> 'treasure'	<i>gem</i>	<i>saloperie</i> 'rubbish, trash'	<i>schifo</i> 'disgust'
4.	<i>joekel</i> 'whopper'	<i>whale</i>	<i>con</i> 'lit. cunt, fool'	<i>gioiello</i> 'jewel'
5.	<i>draak</i> 'dragon'	<i>beast</i>	<i>saleté</i> 'dirt, dirtiness'	<i>meraviglia</i> 'wonder'

Examples:

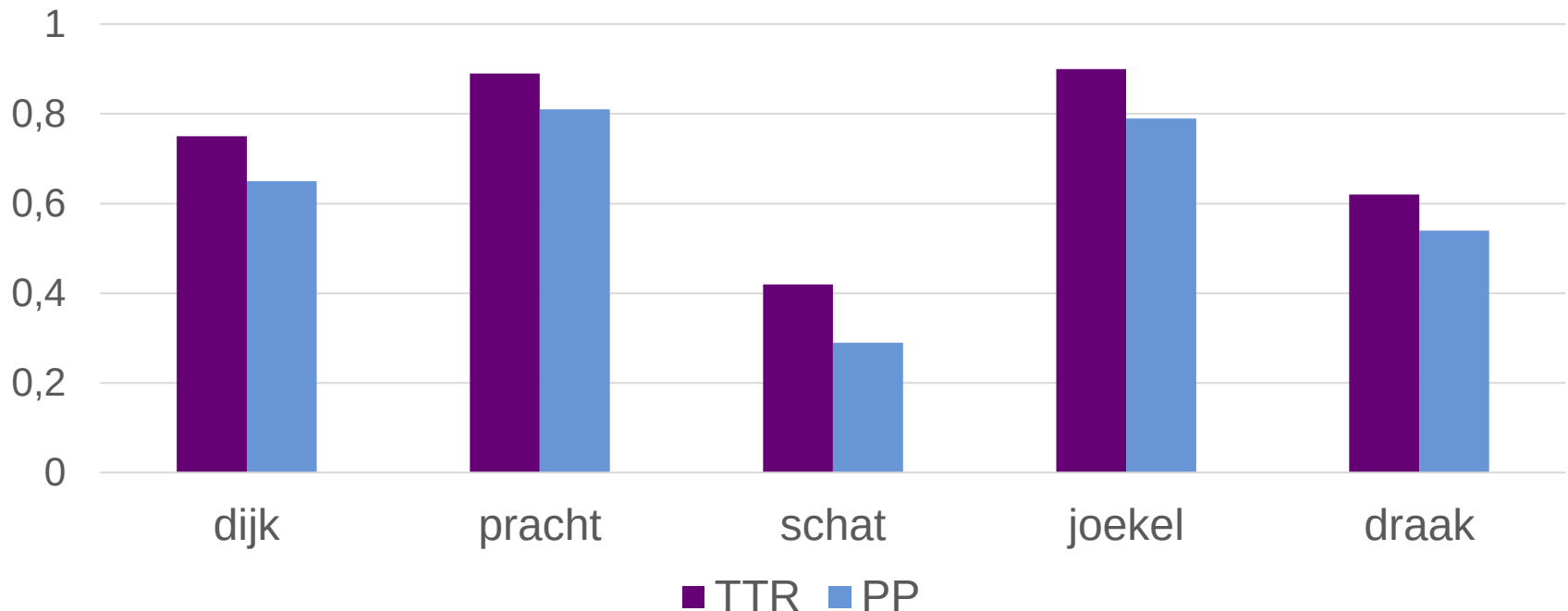
- een **dijk** van een game ‘a great game’ (lit. a dike of a game)
- a **hell** of a day
- un **putain** de porte d’entrée ‘a damn front door’ (lit. a whore of a front door)
- quel **capolavoro** di pizza ‘what a masterpiece of a pizza’

Dutch: Semantics N2



- *een dijk van een **stem*** (n=11) 'a powerful voice' (lit. a dike of a voice)
- *een pracht van een **verhaal*** (n=4) 'a beautiful story' (lit. a beauty of a story)
- *een schat van een **hond*** (n=15) 'a lovely dog' (lit. a treasure of a dog)
- *een joekel van een **auto*** (n=3) 'a huge car' (lit. a whopper of a car)
- *een draak van een **wedstrijd*** (n=20) 'a terrible match' (lit. a dragon of a match)

Dutch: Productivity scores

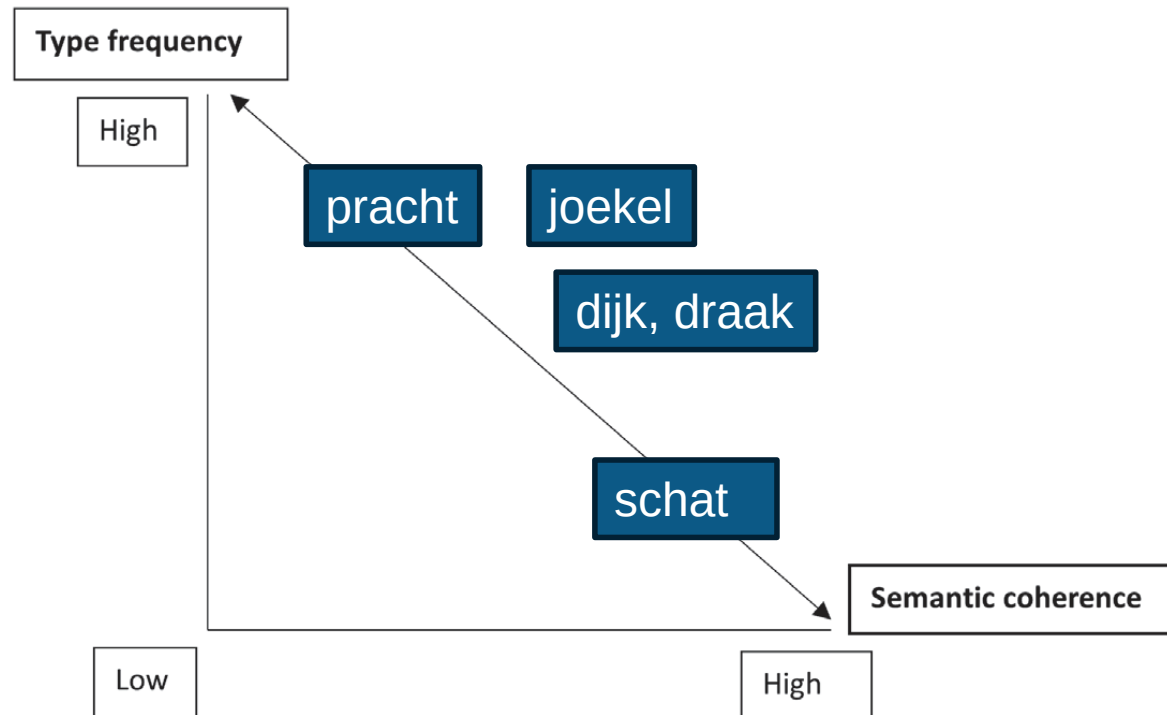


Examples of hapaxes:

- een dijk van een **smartphone**
- een pracht van een **bruidstaart**
- een schat van een **meisjespapegaai**
- een joekel van een **courgette**
- een draak van een **coach**

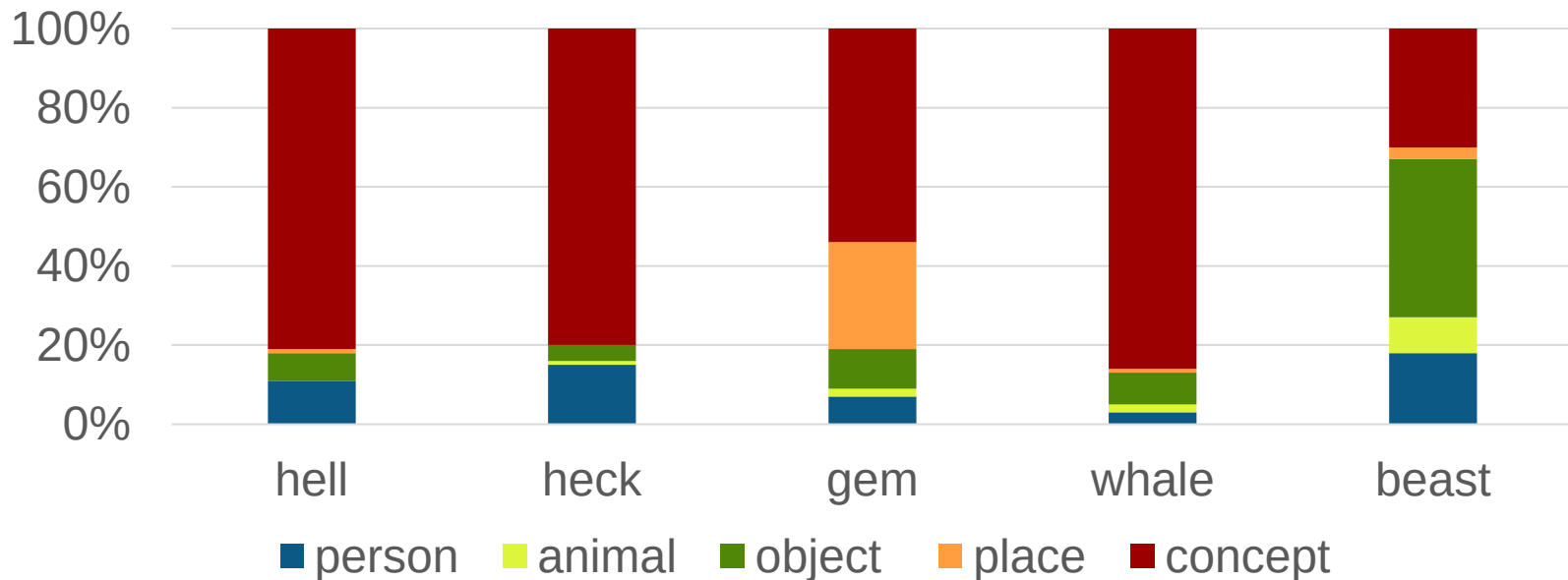
‘a powerful smartphone’
 ‘a beauty of a wedding cake’
 ‘a sweetheart of a girl parrot’
 ‘a giant zucchini’
 ‘a dragon of a coach’

Dutch: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?



- *pracht* & *joekel*: high productivity
 - *pracht*: low semantic specialization
 - *joekel*: preference for objects (64%)
- *dijk* & *draak*: medium productivity, both preference for concepts (66% - 73%)
- *schat*: low productivity, preference for people (67%) and animals (27%)

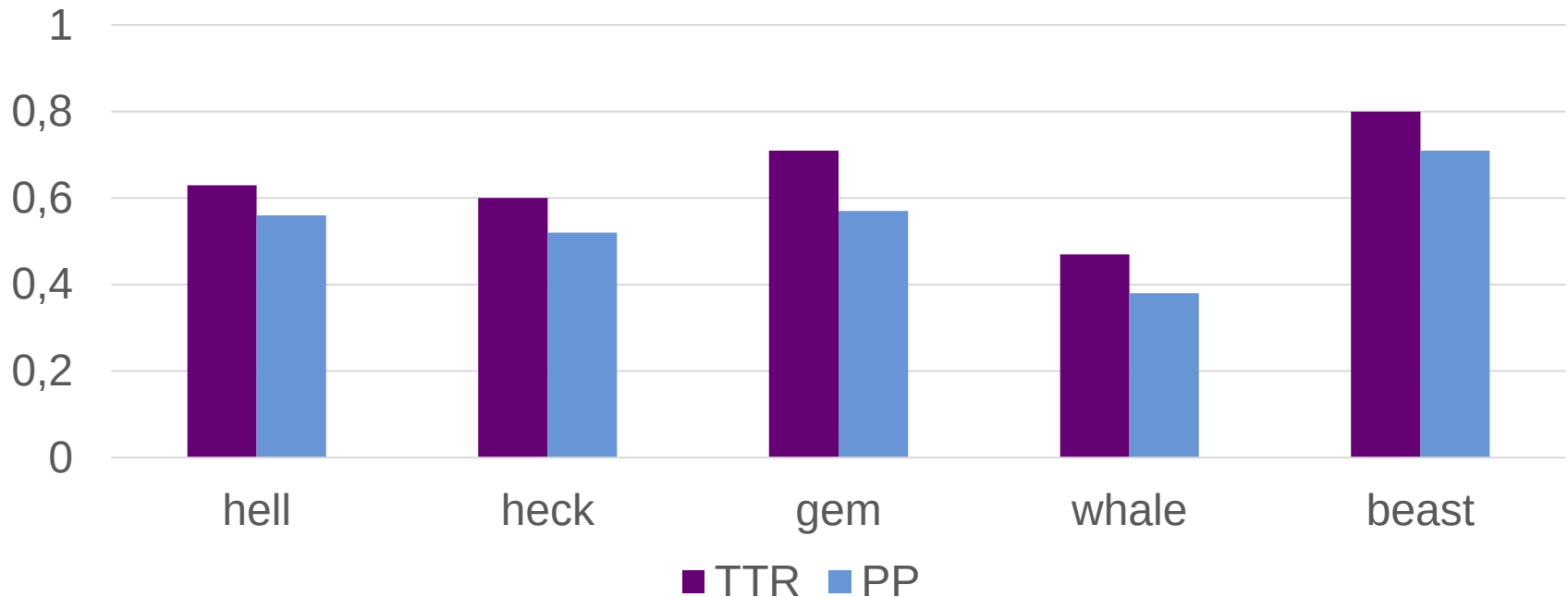
English: Semantics N2



Examples:

- a hell of a *time* (n=5)
- a heck of a *time* (n=10)
- a gem of a *book* (n=8)
- a whale of a *time* (n=39)
- a beast of a *machine* (n=8)

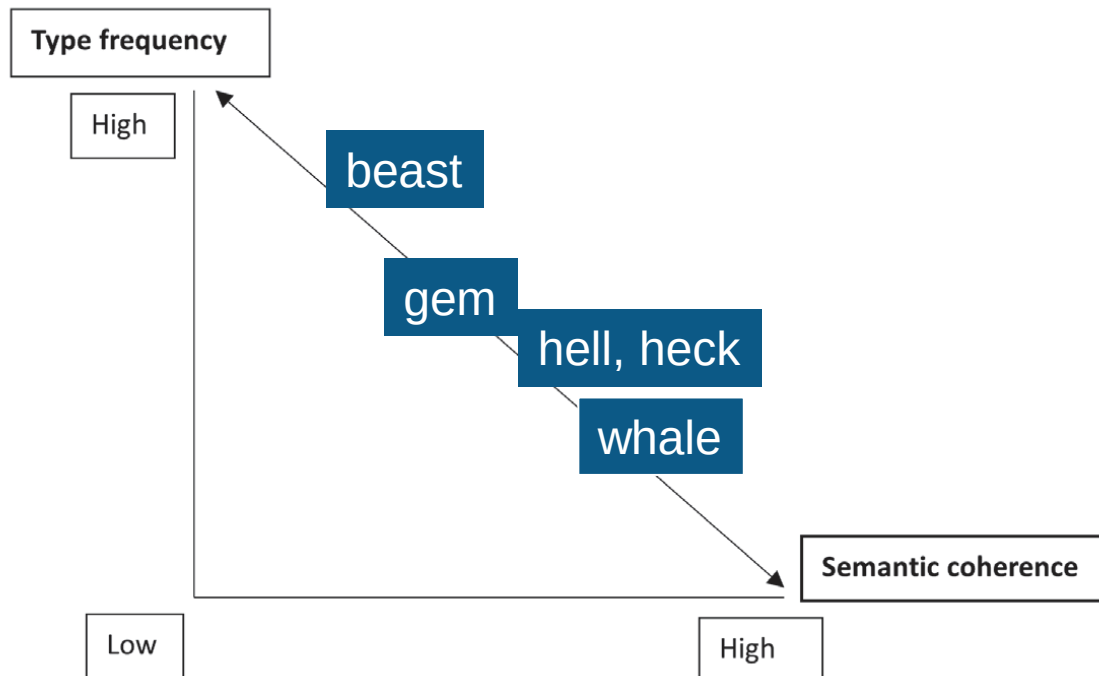
English: Productivity



- **Examples of hapaxes:**

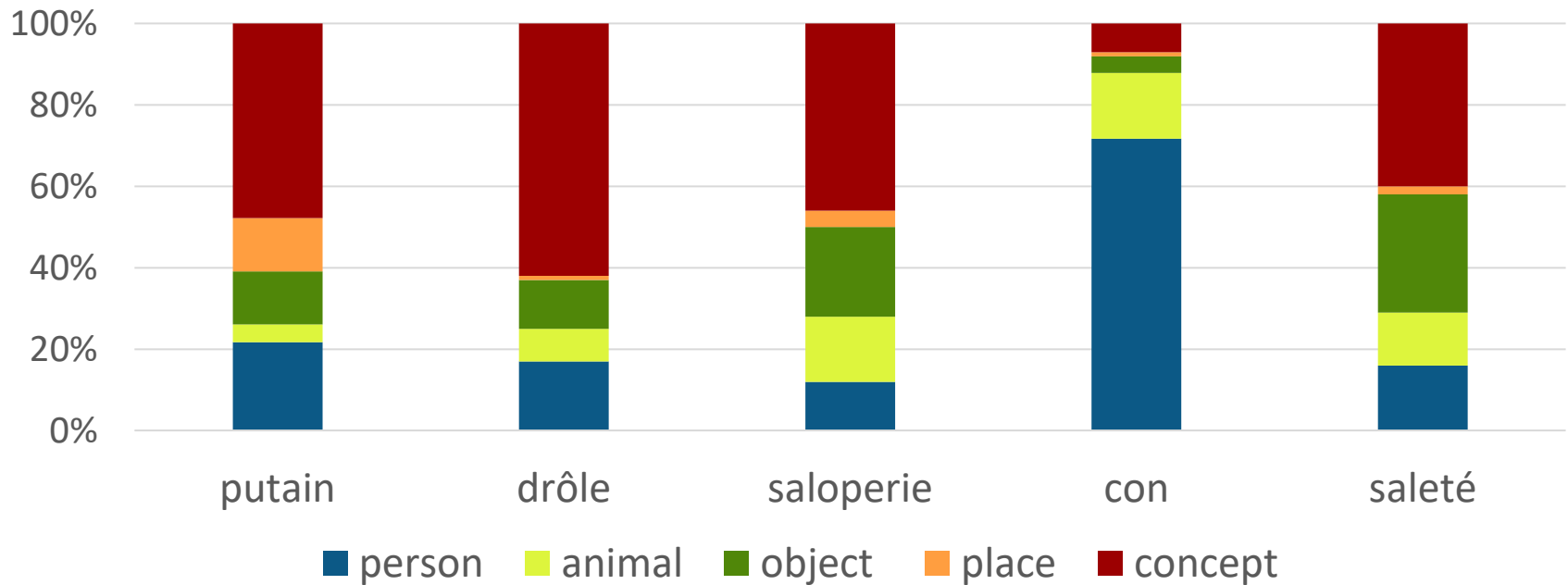
- a hell of a *beating*
- one heck of a *cliffhanger*
- a gem of a *town*
- a whale of a *job*
- a beast of a *kayak*

English: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?



- *beast*: high productivity, lower semantic specialization
- *gem*: medium productivity, preference for concepts (54%) and places (27%)
- *hell* and *heck*: medium productivity, both preference for concepts (81% - 80%)
- *whale*: low productivity, high semantic specialization, preference for concepts (86%)

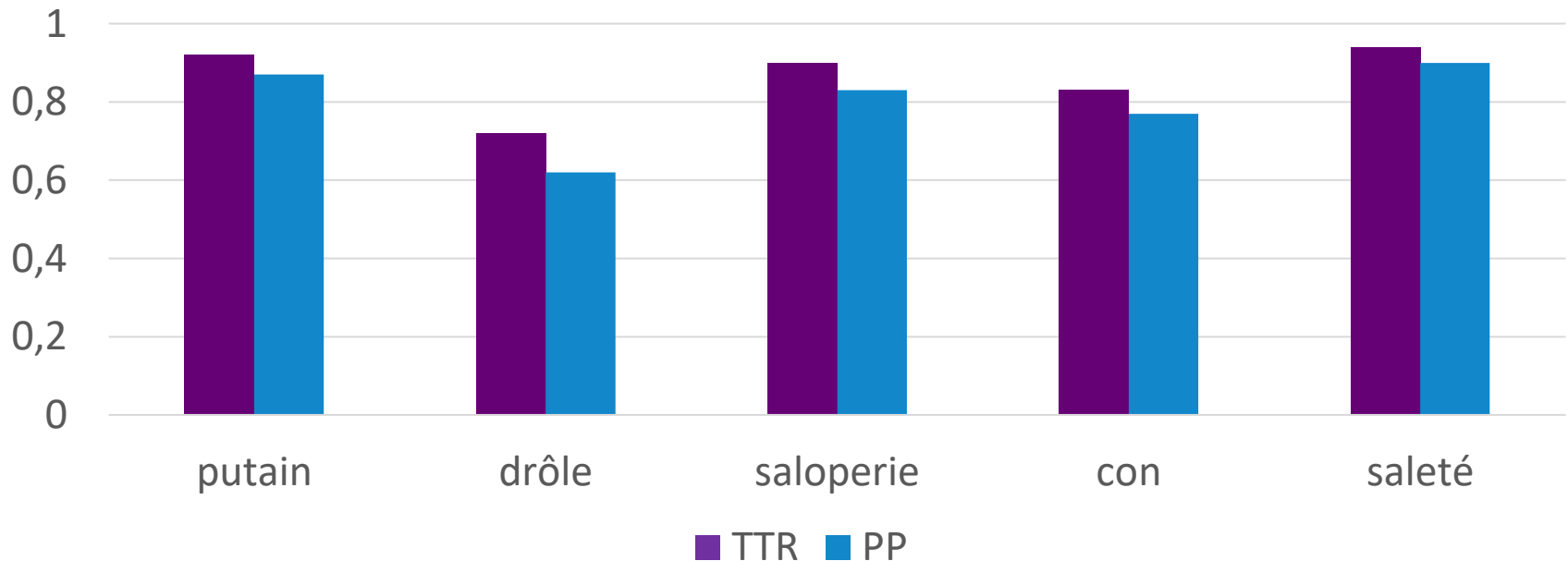
French: Semantics N2



Examples

- *Putain de **merde** !* (n=5) 'Fucking hell!'
- *Quelle drôle d'**idée** !* (n=8) 'What a crazy idea!'
- *Cette saloperie de **maladie*** (n=4) 'this filthy disease'
- *Un con de **Français*** (n=8) 'an idiot of a Frenchman'
- *Cette saleté de **maladie*** (n=4) 'this filthy disease'

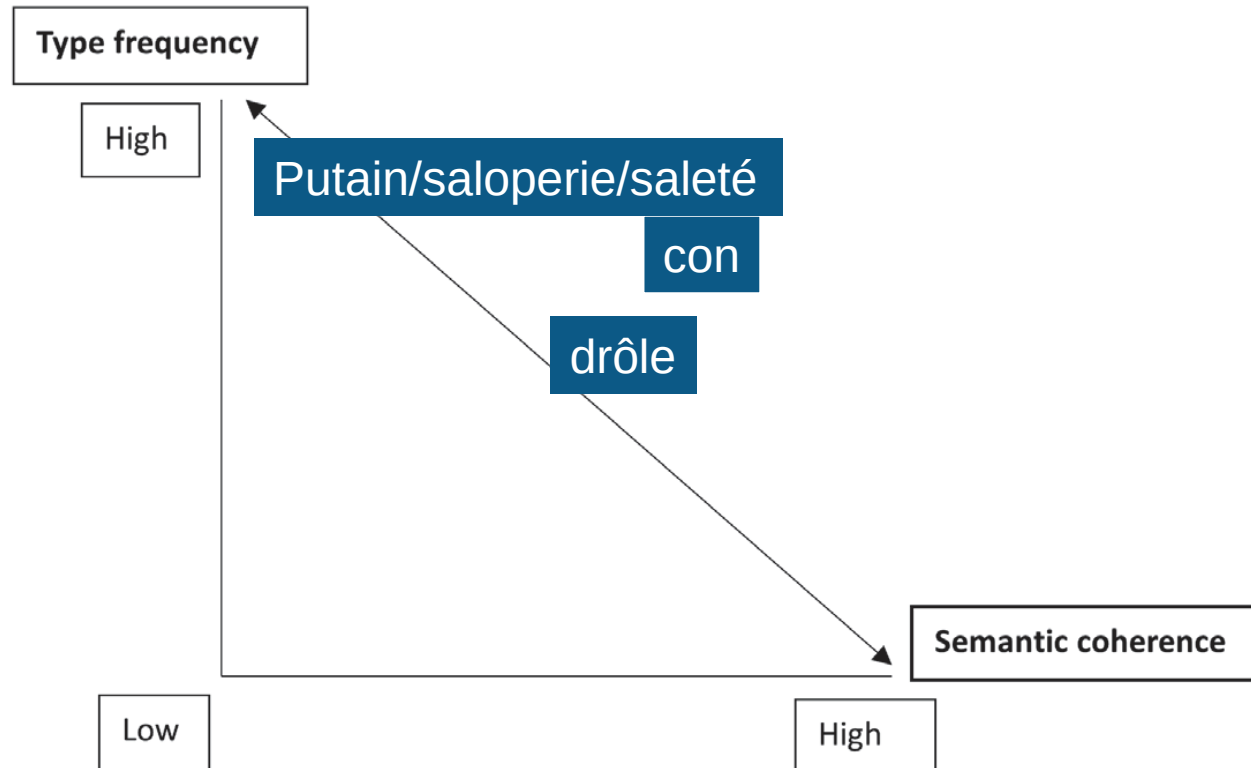
French: Productivity



- **Examples of hapaxes:**

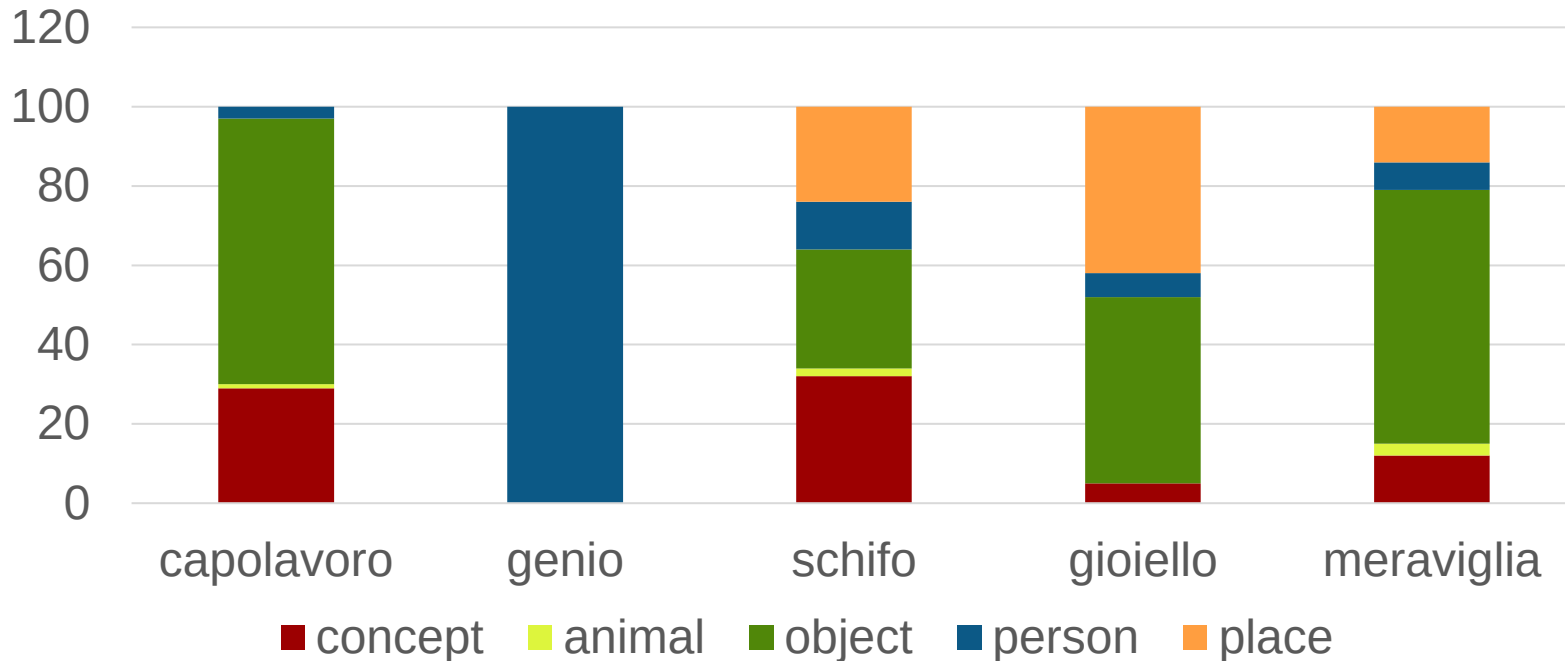
- *Ce putain de **romantisme*** 'this fucking romanticism'
- *Un drôle de **rêve*** 'a crazy dream'
- *Cette saloperie d'**Excel** !* 'this shitty Excel'
- *ces cons de **cyclistes*** 'these idiots of cyclists'
- *une saleté de **bactérie*** 'a nasty bacterium'

French: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?



- *Putain/saloperie/saleté*: high productivity and low semantic coherence
- *Con*: high productivity, but also high semantic coherence (person 71%)
- *Drôle*: less productive, preference for concepts (62%)

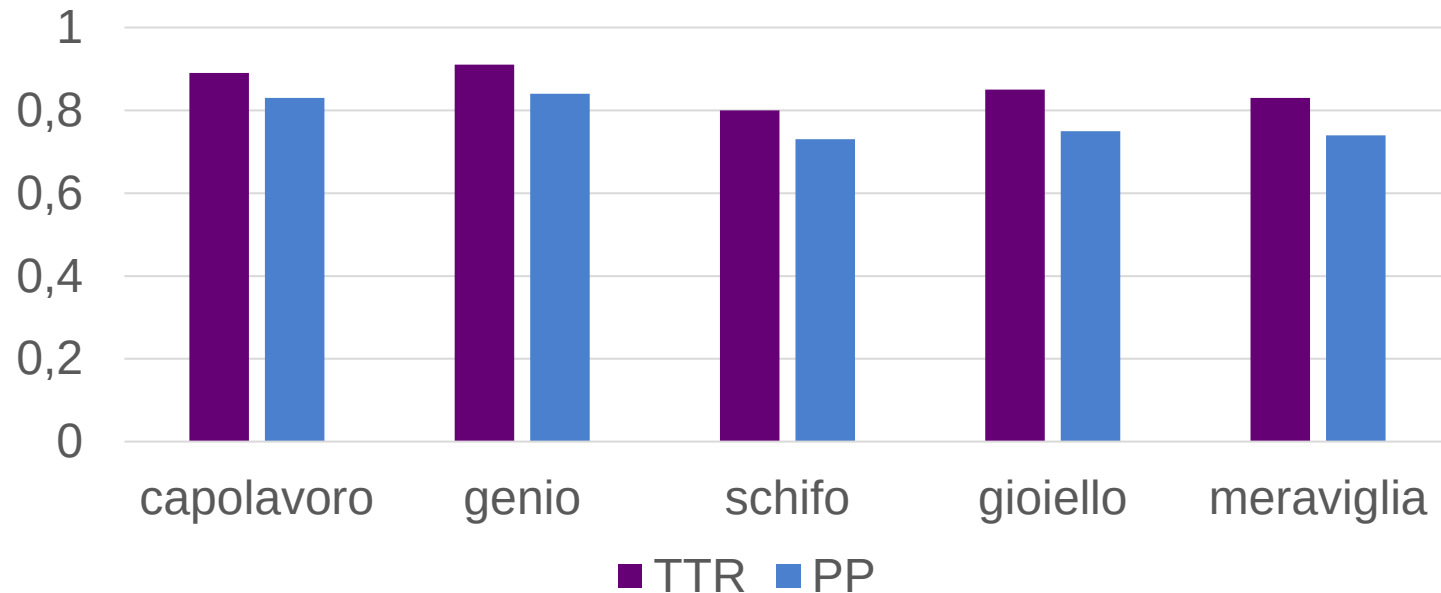
Italian: Semantics N2



- *quel capolavoro di film* (n=5)
- *quel genio di mia madre* (n=3)
- *questo schifo di mondo* (n=9)
- *quel gioiello di città* (n=6)
- *questa meraviglia di torta* (n=5)

‘that masterpiece of a film’
 ‘that genius of my mother’
 ‘this disgust of world’
 ‘that jewel of a city’
 ‘this wonder of a cake’

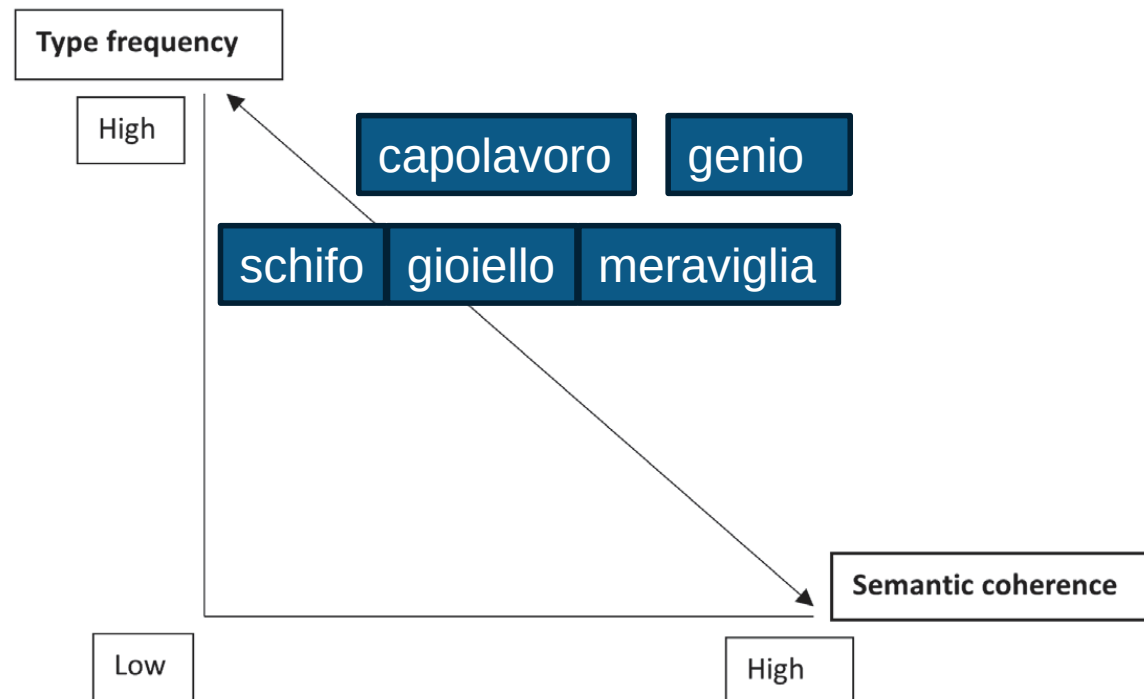
Italian: Productivity



- **Examples of hapaxes:**

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| • <i>quel capolavoro di disco</i> | ‘that masterpiece of disco’ |
| • <i>quel genio di ministro</i> | ‘that genius of ministry’ |
| • <i>questo schifo di strada</i> | ‘this disgust of a road’ |
| • <i>questo gioiello di video</i> | ‘this jewel of a video’ |
| • <i>quella meraviglia di auto</i> | ‘that wonder of a car’ |

Italian: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?



- *genio* & *capolavoro*: highest productivity
 - *genio*: high semantic specialization: only person
 - *capolavoro*: preference for objects (64%)
- *gioiello*, *meraviglia* & *schifo*: high productivity
 - *meraviglia*: preference for objects (64%)
 - *gioiello*: preference for objects (47%) and places (42%)
 - *schifo*: low semantic coherence

Discussion and conclusions

- **RQ1: Cross-linguistic similarities and differences?**

- Comparable schematic pattern [DET1 N1 PREP (DET2) N2]
- Comparable non-compositional evaluative semantics
- But also: subtle cross-linguistic differences:
 - **Formal differences:** more variation in DET1 position in Germanic than in Romance; DET2 mostly absent in Romance
 - **Semantic specialization:** ameliorative/augmentative connotation in Dutch, mixed profile in English, pejorative in French and Italian

!!! In addition, **intra-linguistic variation** of the semi-filled subpatterns with respect to semantic specialization and productivity

Discussion and conclusions

- **RQ2: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?**

- **Inverse correlation between productivity and semantic coherence often confirmed**

- High productivity and low semantic coherence
 - DU [*een pracht van een N*]
 - FR [*ce(tte) putain/saloperie/saleté de N*]
- Low productivity and high semantic coherence
 - DU [*een schat van een PERSON/ANIMAL*]
 - ENG [*a whale of a CONCEPT*]

- **But also, exceptions to this tendency:**

- Specific subpatterns combine high productivity and high semantic coherence:
 - DU [*een joekel van een OBJECT*]
 - FR [*ce con de PERSON*]
 - IT [*quel genio di PERSON*]

→ Constructional productivity does not exclude semantic constraints!

Future areas of investigation

Further statistical analysis

- Statistical assessment of the degree of association/repulsion between lexical fillers and construction → collostructional analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003)

Competing constructions

- For instance: competing evaluative compounds in Dutch (cf. Van Goethem 2023)
 - *De kanosport is een **prachtsport** (...) ‘beautiful sport’*
 - *Geen **joekel-tattoo** maar gewoon een kleintje (...) ‘giant tattoo’*

Expressive pleonastic constructions in French

- ***Putain de saloperie de tout !** ‘Fucking fucking everything’*
- ***Saloperie de saloperie de café de merde !** ‘Fucking awful coffee!’*

Grammaticalization into intensifiers?

- *Le prochain chapitre est **putain de long** ‘the next chapter is fucking long’*
- ***A hell/heck of a lot of money***

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