

## Gradable and non-gradable adjectives: It's so terrible to say "very terrible"!

**Kitty:** Douglas, learning a foreign language isn't easy. It's not just their differences from the way we speak in our mother tongue, there're some concepts which exist in a foreign language but don't exist in our mother tongue.

**Douglas:** What exactly do you mean by that?

**Kitty:** Well, let's take adjectives for example. In Chinese and many Asian languages, when we see something beautiful, we simply say "it's beautiful". If we want to emphasise it, we could add an adverb and say "it's very beautiful".

**Douglas:** Well, that's just the same as in English.

**Kitty:** Right. But in English, you have other adjectives to describe "beautiful". You can say "pretty, **gorgeous** or **stunning**".

**Douglas:** True.

**Kitty:** Although they're used to describe something beautiful, what are their differences?

**Douglas:** I'd say their levels of beauty are different. I think "beautiful and pretty" just mean good-looking whereas "gorgeous and stunning" mean extremely good-looking.

**Kitty:** Yeah, exactly. If you look at "beautiful" and "pretty", they can be used with various adverbs like "a bit", "slightly", "fairly", "very", "extremely", "really" and "so", etc. **to show different degrees of a quality**. Er... For instance, "fairly beautiful" means "more than a little beautiful" whereas "very beautiful" means "beautiful to a great degree". Besides, they **can be used in the comparative and superlative forms** such as "more beautiful, the most beautiful" and "prettier, the prettiest". They are known as **gradable adjectives**.

How about "gorgeous" and "stunning"? Do you use such adverbs with them? For example, "a bit stunning"? Or "very stunning"?

**Douglas:** Absolutely not! "Stunning" by itself already means "extremely beautiful". It doesn't make sense to say "a bit stunning". When it's extremely beautiful, it can't be a little beautiful at the same time. Equally, "very stunning" is **redundant** and grammatically incorrect. Why would we have to add "very" on top of "extremely"?

**Kitty:** Right. Adjectives like "stunning" and "gorgeous" imply **the greatest degree or the extreme of a quality**. They **don't have comparative or superlative forms**. They are called **non-gradable adjectives**. If we want to emphasise them, we use adverbs such as "absolutely", "completely", "totally", "utterly", "really" and "so" to bring out their **"complete quality"**. For example, "absolutely stunning", "utterly gorgeous".

Well, we've just identified some non-gradable adjectives which imply the extreme quality, but there's another type of non-gradable adjectives. Can you guess what it is?

**Douglas:** I think it's "yes/no or true/false adjectives" like "right" and "correct". We can't say "You're very right." We say "You're absolutely right."

**Kitty:** Yeah, you're **absolutely right!** So, when we use adjectives, we have to know whether they're gradable or non-gradable in order to use correct adverbs. Um... **Off the top of my head**, I can think of a few examples of gradable and non-gradable adjectives in pairs, like:

gradable adjectives

tired  
good  
cold  
angry  
bad

non-gradable adjectives

exhausted  
excellent/perfect  
freezing  
furious  
terrible

Can you think of any others?

**Douglas:** Um... **Right offhand**, you could say:

gradable adjectives

hot  
wet  
interesting  
tasty  
afraid/scared/frightened

non-gradable adjectives

scorching/sweltering  
dripping/soaking  
amazing  
delicious  
terrified/horrified

**Kitty:** Well done! You've given **a host of** good examples. There's one more thing I want to add. Although we have to use different adverbs with gradable and non-gradable adjectives, the adverbs "**really**" and "**so**" can be used with both types of adjectives.

**Douglas:** Ah, right. They're very **handy**, aren't they? On the other hand, we have to pay attention to the **collocation**. For example, we use "utterly" with some adjectives and not others. We say "**utterly amazing**" but we don't really say "utterly delicious".

**Kitty:** Thanks for reminding me. When it comes to collocation, there're no rules. We just have to learn them.

**Douglas:** True. We **pick them up** through hearing or reading them. Actually, there're many other adverbs which can **collocate** with gradable and non-gradable adjectives.

**Kitty:** Well, I think it'll be better to prepare a summary to include what we've just discussed today.

**Douglas:** Yeah, that's a good idea.