

"A gem of a construction. Productivity and semantic coherence of the Evaluative Binominal Construction in Dutch, English, French and Italian"

Hendrikx, Isa ; Piunno, Valentina ; Van Goethem, Kristel

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the Evaluative Binominal Construction (EBC) (e.g., a hell of a day), represented as the constructional schema [DET1 N1 PREP DET2 N2], which connects an N1 expressing an evaluative quality and an N2 indicating the entity to which the quality is attributed. The EBC has already been studied in several languages such as English (Aarts, 1994, 1998; ten Wolde, 2023), Dutch (Verhagen, 2005; Van Goethem, 2023) and French (Larrivée, 1994), but cross-linguistic studies (e.g., Piunno, in press) are scarce and often not corpus-based (e.g., Foolen, 2004). The first objective of our study is to fill this gap by providing a corpus-based constructionist analysis of the EBC, including four languages (English, Dutch, French and Italian), and by analyzing the main cross-linguistic similarities and differences between the EBC in the languages under study. Additionally, this case study seeks to re-examine Barðdal's (2008) hypothesis of an inverse correlation between productivity and semantic coherence. Our data are taken from the TenTen corpus family on SketchEngine. The top 10 EBC patterns per language are examined in terms of formal properties, productivity and semantic specialization, based on corpus samples of 100 relevant occurrences per pattern (i.e., datasets of 1000 occurrences per language). Preliminary results reveal subtle cross-linguistic differences between the four languages. For instance, on the formal level we find a wide variation in DET1 position in Germanic (e.g., ENG a/that/my hell of a house) but a preference for a demonstrative in Romance (e.g. ...

CITE THIS VERSION

Hendrikx, Isa ; Piunno, Valentina ; Van Goethem, Kristel. *A gem of a construction. Productivity and semantic coherence of the Evaluative Binominal Construction in Dutch, English, French and Italian*. Constructions binominales en "of" et métaphore (Université Grenoble-Alpes (Online workshop), 21/05/2025). <http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/301585>

Le dépôt institutionnel DIAL est destiné au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques émanant des membres de l'UCLouvain. Toute utilisation de ce document à des fins lucratives ou commerciales est strictement interdite. L'utilisateur s'engage à respecter les droits d'auteur liés à ce document, principalement le droit à l'intégrité de l'œuvre et le droit à la paternité. La politique complète de copyright est disponible sur la page [Copyright policy](#)

DIAL is an institutional repository for the deposit and dissemination of scientific documents from UCLouvain members. Usage of this document for profit or commercial purposes is strictly prohibited. User agrees to respect copyright about this document, mainly text integrity and source mention. Full content of copyright policy is available at [Copyright policy](#)

A gem of a construction.

Productivity and semantic coherence of the Evaluative Binominal Construction in Dutch, English, French and Italian

Isa Hendriks, Valentina Piunno, Kristel Van Goethem

Constructions binominales en OF et métaphore

21/05/2025

Université Grenoble Alpes & Université Rennes 2



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI BERGAMO



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 genio di bambino* ‘that smart child’ (lit. that genius 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 (often 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)
- Italian (Alinei 1971)
- Arabic (Vallaro 1993)

- **Cross-linguistic studies:**

- Germanic and Romance languages (a.o. Foolen 2004, Simone in press)
- 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

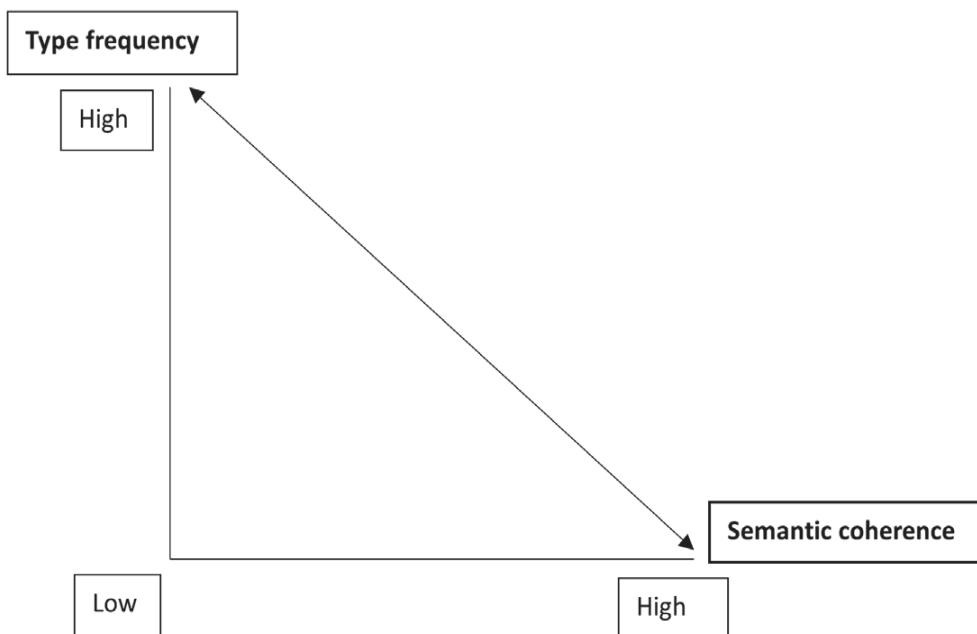
Research goal

- 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 type frequency and semantic coherence



Barðdal (2008:35)

“[...] 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)

“(...) the categories relatively close to the cline will show most signs of productivity, while categories further away from the cline will be either low/nonproductive (lower left-most sphere) or non-existing (upper right-most sphere).” (Barðdal 2008: 39)

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) 2020
- enTenTen21 (52 billion words) 2021

two Romance languages (French and Italian)

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

Concordance function – CQL queries

Combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis

Data extraction

Extraction of the **top 15** EBC patterns per language

- General CQL Query:
 - e.g., English [word="a"] [tag = "noun.*"] [word="of"] [word="a"]
- Extract top 15 EBC patterns per language
- General analysis of frequency and semantic properties of top 15

Detailed analysis of the **top 15** EBC micro-constructions 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 15x 100 relevant occurrences per language
= **6000 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 15

	Dutch	English	French	Italian
1	<i>een dijk van een</i>	<i>a hell of a</i>	<i>ce/cette putain de</i>	<i>questo fenomeno di</i>
2	<i>een pracht van een</i>	<i>a heck of a</i>	<i>ce/cette drôle de</i>	<i>quel cazzo di</i>
3	<i>een schat van een</i>	<i>a gem of a</i>	<i>cette saloperie de</i>	<i>questo capolavoro di</i>
4	<i>een joekel van een</i>	<i>a whale of a</i>	<i>ce con de</i>	<i>quel genio di</i>
5	<i>een draak van een</i>	<i>a beast of a</i>	<i>cette saleté de</i>	<i>quel cavolo di</i>
6	<i>een beest van een</i>	<i>a monster of a</i>	<i>ce monstre de</i>	<i>questo schifo di</i>
7	<i>een juweel van een</i>	<i>a devil of a</i>	<i>ce diable de</i>	<i>questo gioiello di</i>
8	<i>een kanjer van een</i>	<i>a mess of a</i>	<i>ce salaud de</i>	<i>questa meraviglia di</i>
9	<i>een droom van een</i>	<i>a cracker of a</i>	<i>ce connard de</i>	<i>quel maiale di</i>
10	<i>een parel van een</i>	<i>a steal of a</i>	<i>ce bijou de</i>	<i>quello porco di</i>
11	<i>een knaller van een</i>	<i>a rollercoaster of a</i>	<i>cet imbécile de</i>	<i>quel pazzo di</i>
12	<i>een dot van een</i>	<i>a bitch of a</i>	<i>cet idiot de</i>	<i>quell' idiota di</i>
13	<i>een boom van een</i>	<i>a rocket of a</i>	<i>cet abruti de</i>	<i>quella merda di</i>
14	<i>een beer van een</i>	<i>a brute of a</i>	<i>cette merde de</i>	<i>quello stronzo di</i>
15	<i>een kast van een</i>	<i>a fuck of a</i>	<i>cet enfoiré de</i>	<i>quel diavolo di</i>

Top 15: Semantics cxn

Dutch	English	French	Italian
een dijk van een	a hell of a	ce/cette putain de	quel fenomeno di
een pracht van een	a heck of a	ce/cette drôle de	quel cazzo di
een schat van een	a gem of a	cette saloperie de	quel capolavoro di
een joekel van een	a whale of a	ce con de	quel genio di
een draak van een	a beast of a	cette saleté de	quel cavolo di
een beest van een	a monster of a	ce monstre de	questo schifo di
een juweel van een	a devil of a	ce diable de	questo gioiello di
een kanjer van een	a mess of a	ce salaud de	questa meraviglia di
een droom van een	a cracker of a	ce connard de	quel maiale di
een parel van een	a steal of a	ce bijou de	quel porco di
een knaller van een	a rollercoaster of a	cet imbécile de	quel pazzo di
een dot van een	a bitch of a	cet idiot de	quell'idiota di
een boom van een	a rocket of a	cet abruti de	quella merda di
een beer van een	a brute of a	cette merde de	quello stronzo di
een kast van een	a fuck of a	cet enfoiré de	quel diavolo di

Ameliorative

Pejorative

Augmentative

Diminutive

Evaluative semantics of the construction as a whole

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'

Metaphorical values of N1

Dutch / English

- Mostly (concrete/abstract) N1 with metaphorical value
 - DU *een **dijk** van een stem* (lit. a dike of a voice) 'a powerful voice'
 - ENG *a **rollercoaster** of a journey*

French / Italian

- Fewer cases of N1 with metaphorical value in the Romance languages
- Often nominalized adjective in N1-slot
 - FR *quel(le) **imbécile** de N*
 - IT *quell'**idiota** di N*

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 ***quella*** *meraviglia 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

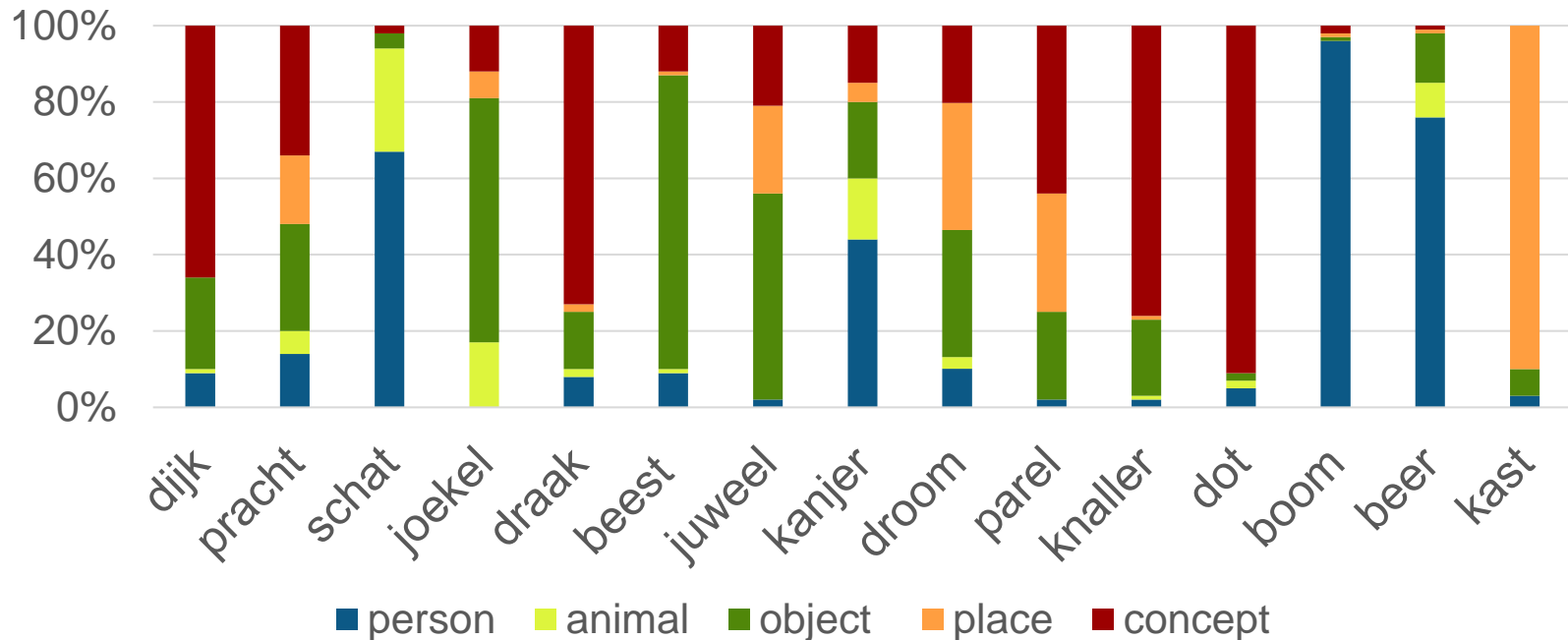
N2

- 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’

RESULTS:

2. Relation between productivity and semantic coherence

Dutch: Semantics N2



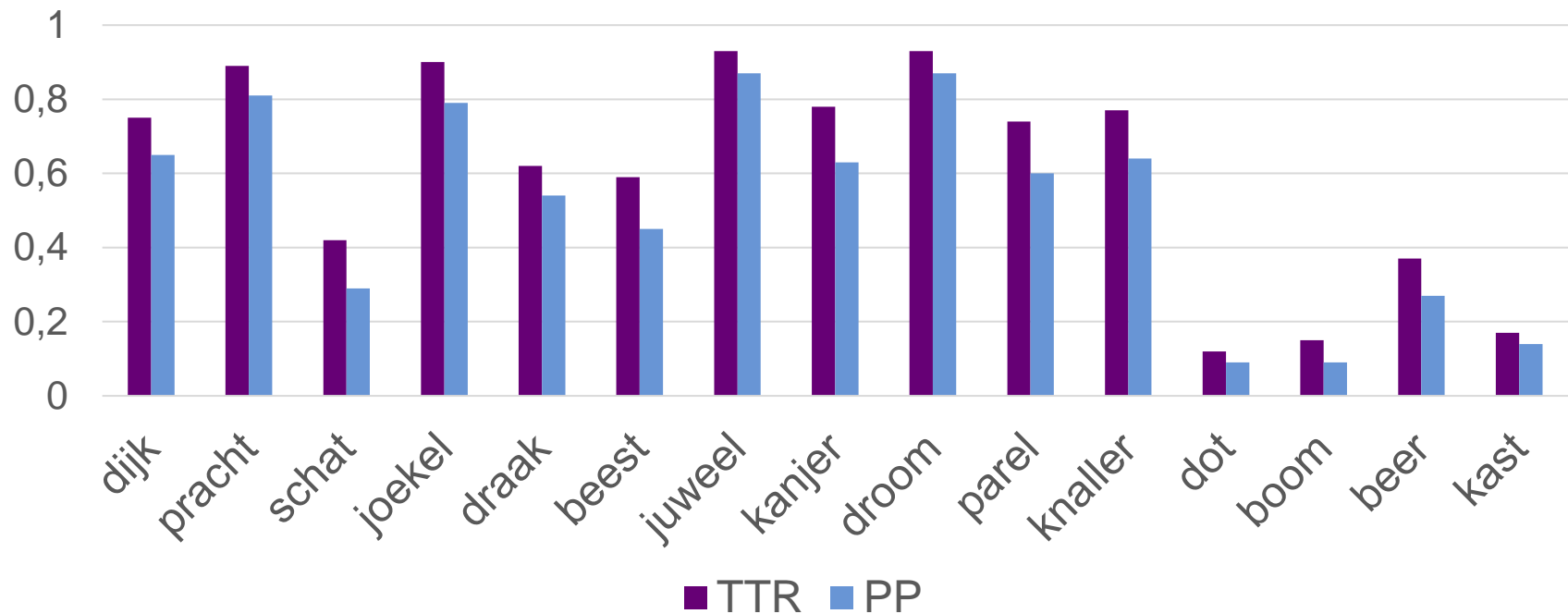
Examples with semantic variation

- een **pracht** van een **verhaal** (n=4) (lit. a beauty of a story) 'a beautiful story'
- een **kanjer** van een **boek** (n=5) (lit. a whopper of a book) 'a great book'
- een **droom** van een **vakantie** 'a dream of a holiday'

Examples with semantic specialization

- een **dot** van een **kans** (n=86) (lit. a blob of a chance) 'a golden opportunity'
- een **boom** van een **kerel** (n=41), **vent** (n=39) (lit. a tree of a man) 'a big guy'
- een **kast** van een **huis** (n=80) 'a mansion of a house, a huge house'

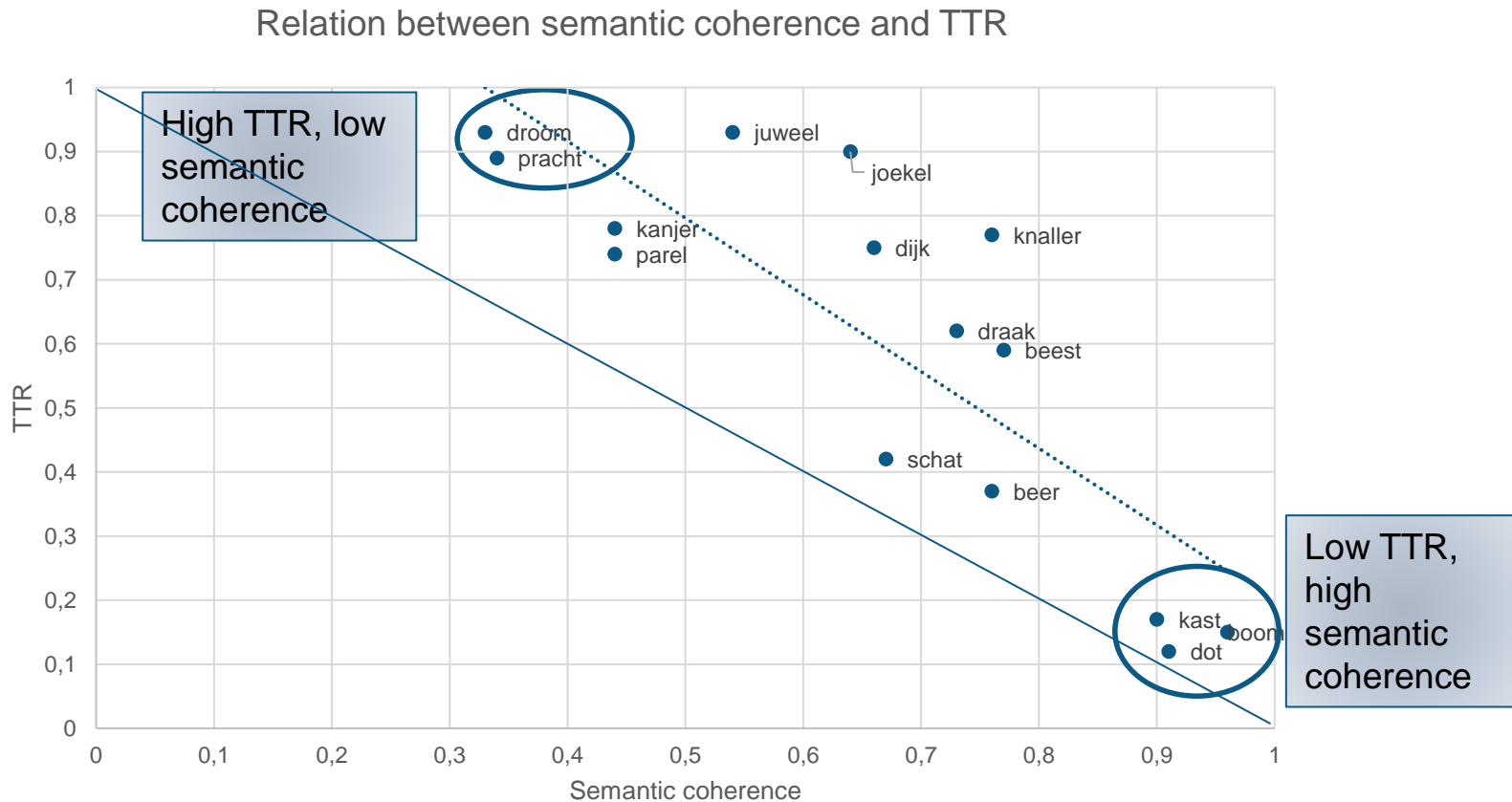
Dutch: Productivity scores



High productivity (hapaxes)

- een **joekel** van een **courgette** (lit. a whopper of a zucchini) ‘a giant zucchini’
- een **juweel** van een **doelpunt** ‘a gem of a goal’
- een **droom** van een **vrijgezellenfeest** ‘a dream of a bachelor party’

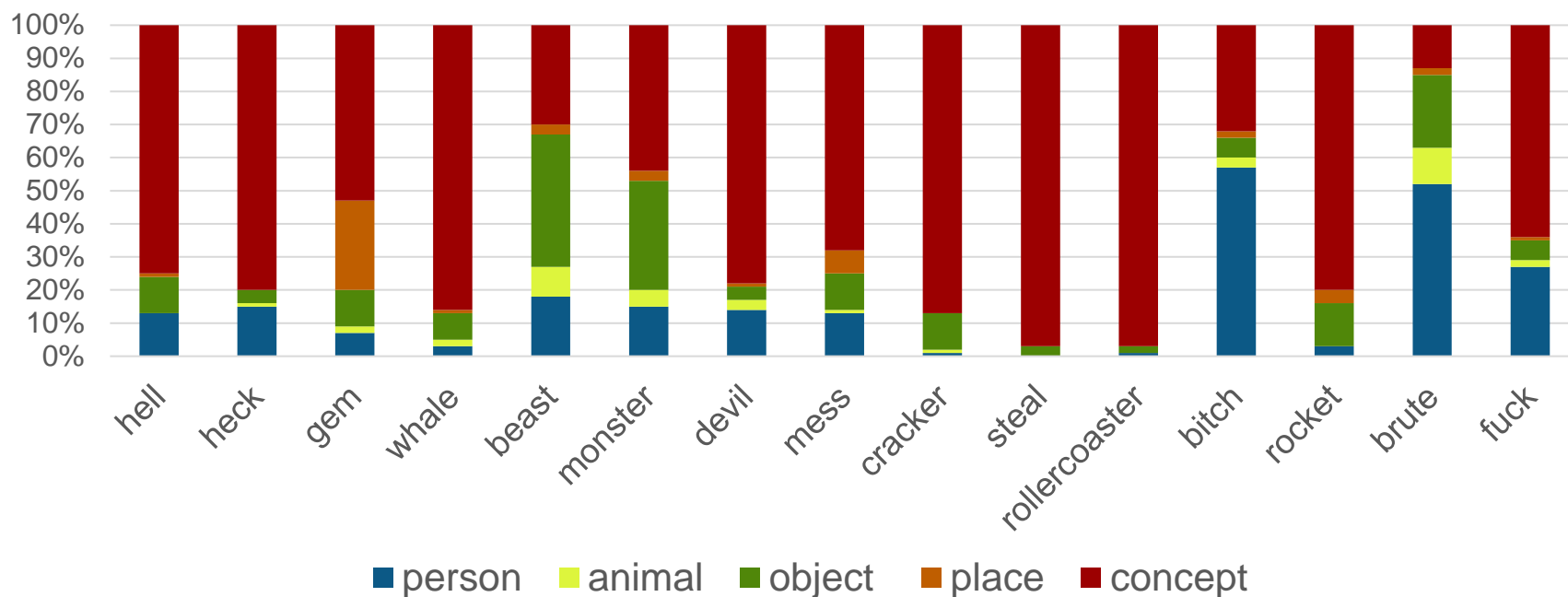
Dutch: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence



Spearman $r_s = -0.85$ ($p < .01$)

→ Strong negative relationship between TTR and semantic coherence

English: Semantics N2

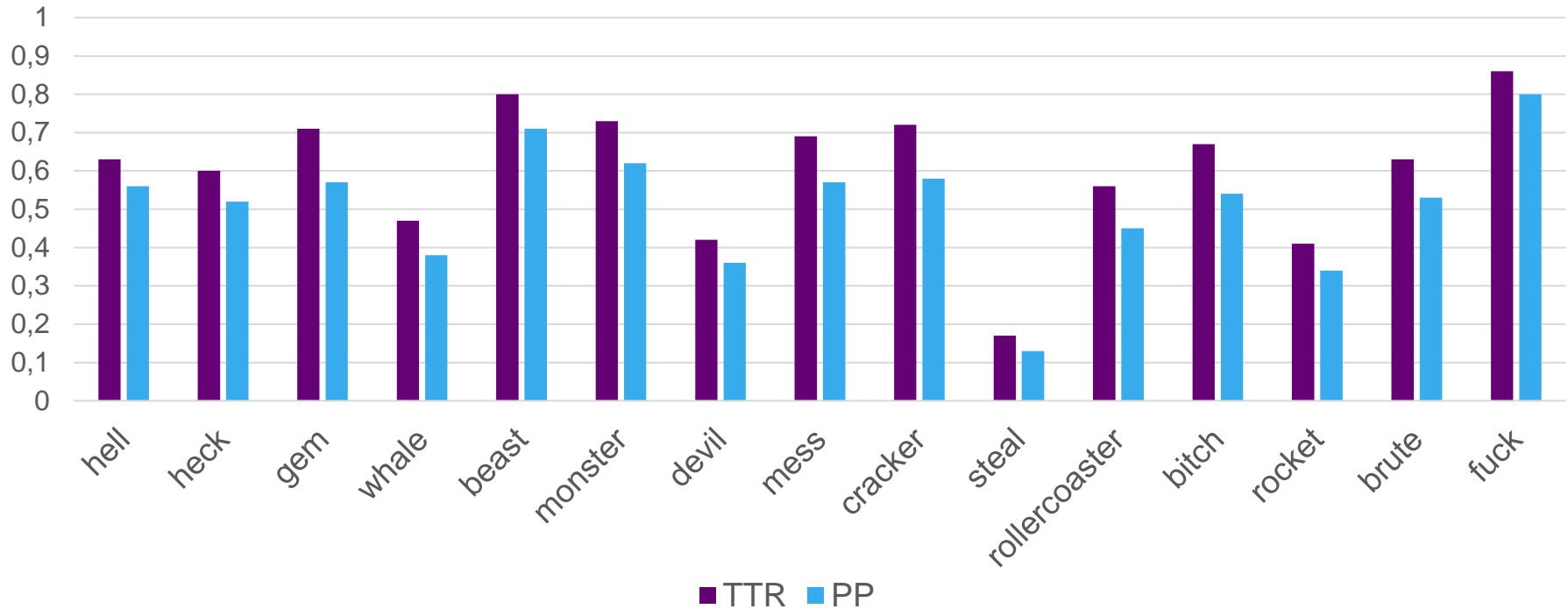


Examples with semantic variation: Examples with semantic specialization:

- a **beast** of a **machine** (n=8)
- a **monster** of a **man** (n=8)
- a **brute** of a **man** (n=23)

- a **cracker** of a **game** (n=10)
- a **steal** of a **deal** (n=58)
- a **rollercoaster** of a **year** (n=13)

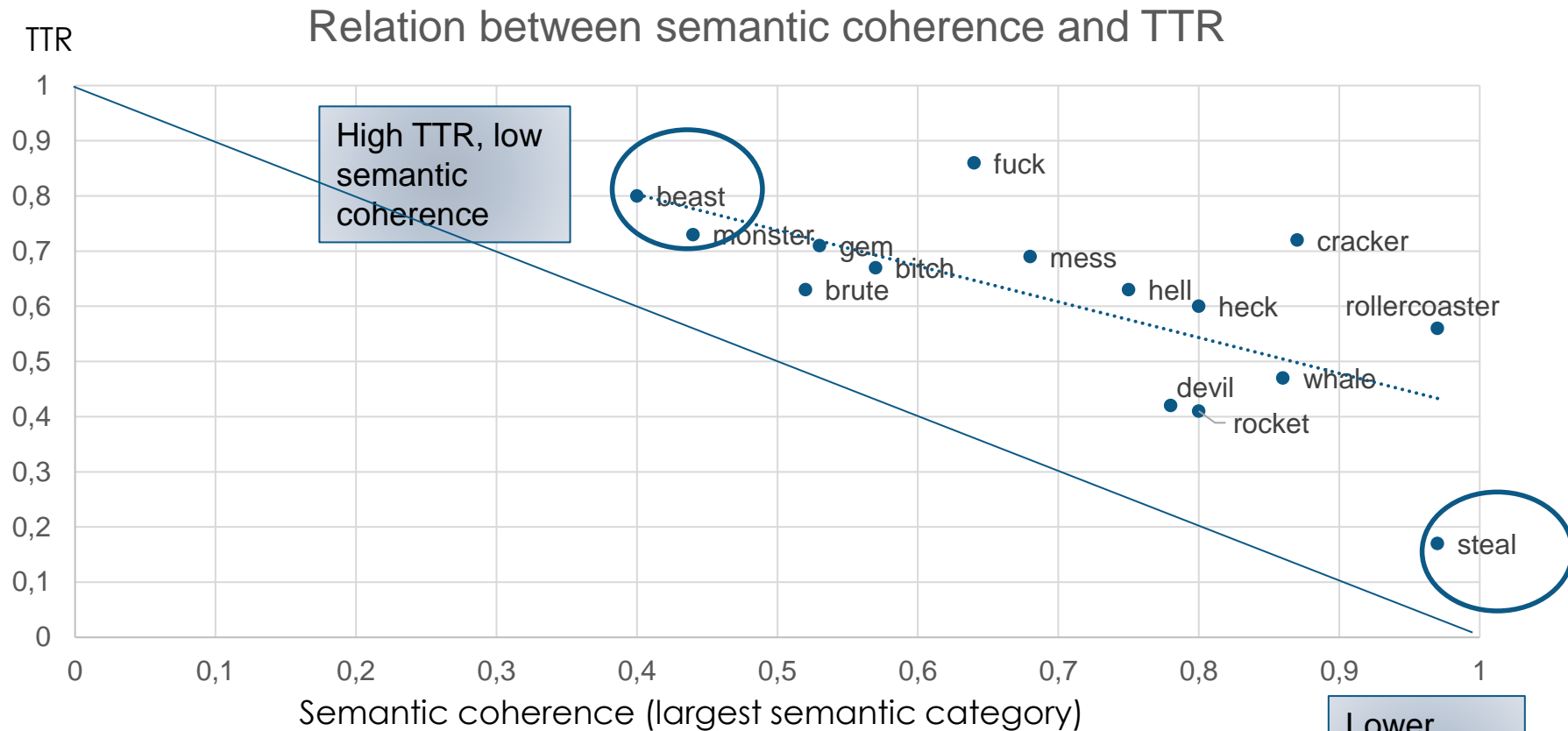
English: Productivity



High productivity (hapaxes):

- *a **beast** of a **kayak***
- *one **monster** of a **migraine***
- *some greedy **fuck** of a **chief***

English: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?

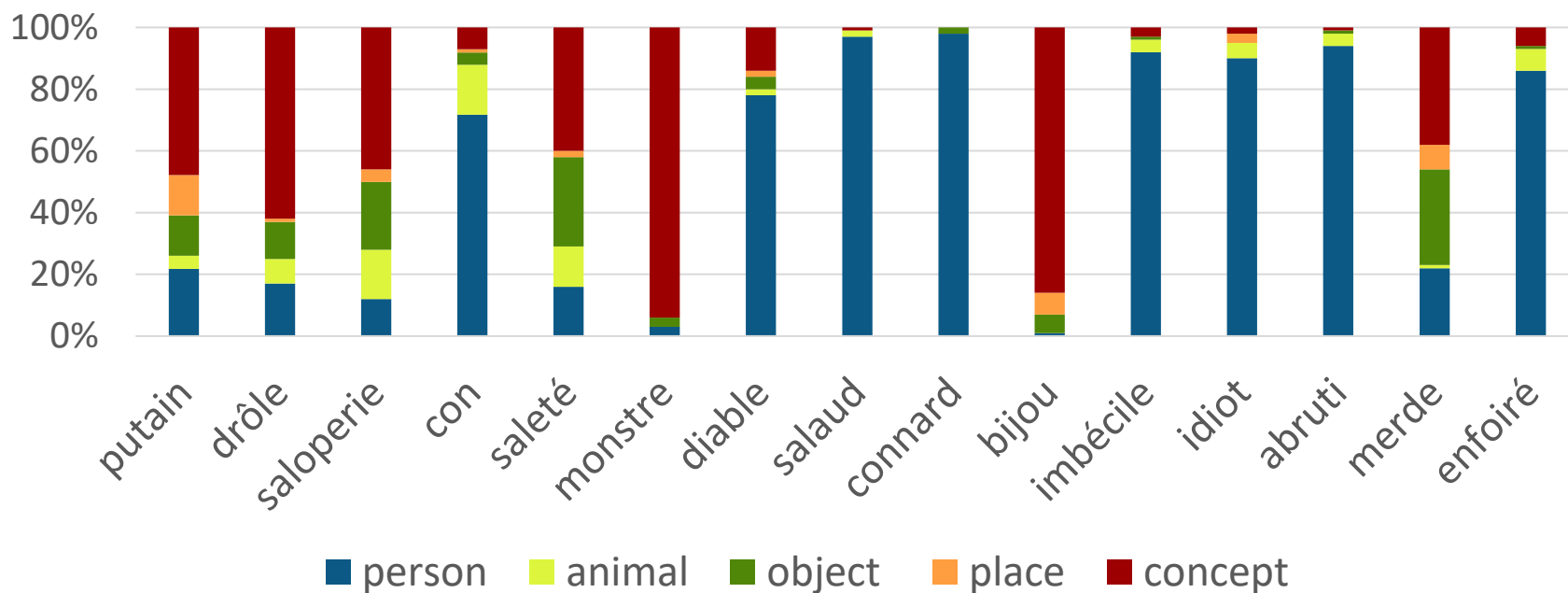


Spearman $r_s = -0.57$ ($p = .03$)

→ Negative relationship between TTR and semantic coherence

Lower
TTR, high
semantic
coherence

French: Semantics N2



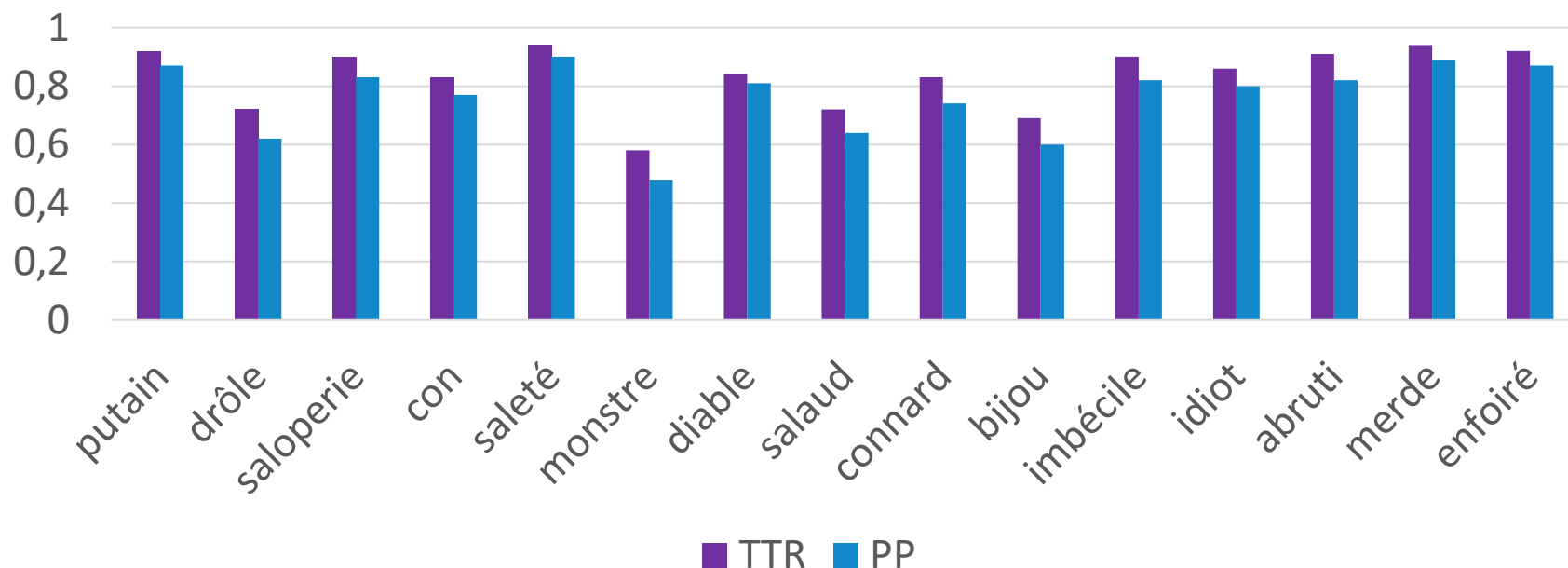
Examples of semantic variation

- *Putain de merde !* (n=5) 'Fucking hell!'
- *Cette saleté de maladie* (n=4) 'this filthy disease'
- *Ces merdes de voisins* (n=3) 'those shitty neighbours'

Examples of semantic specialization

- *Mon connard de père* (n=6) 'my jerk of a father'
- *Salauds de pauvres* (n=13) 'bastards of poor people'
- *Ce monstre de puissance* (n=19) 'this monster of power'

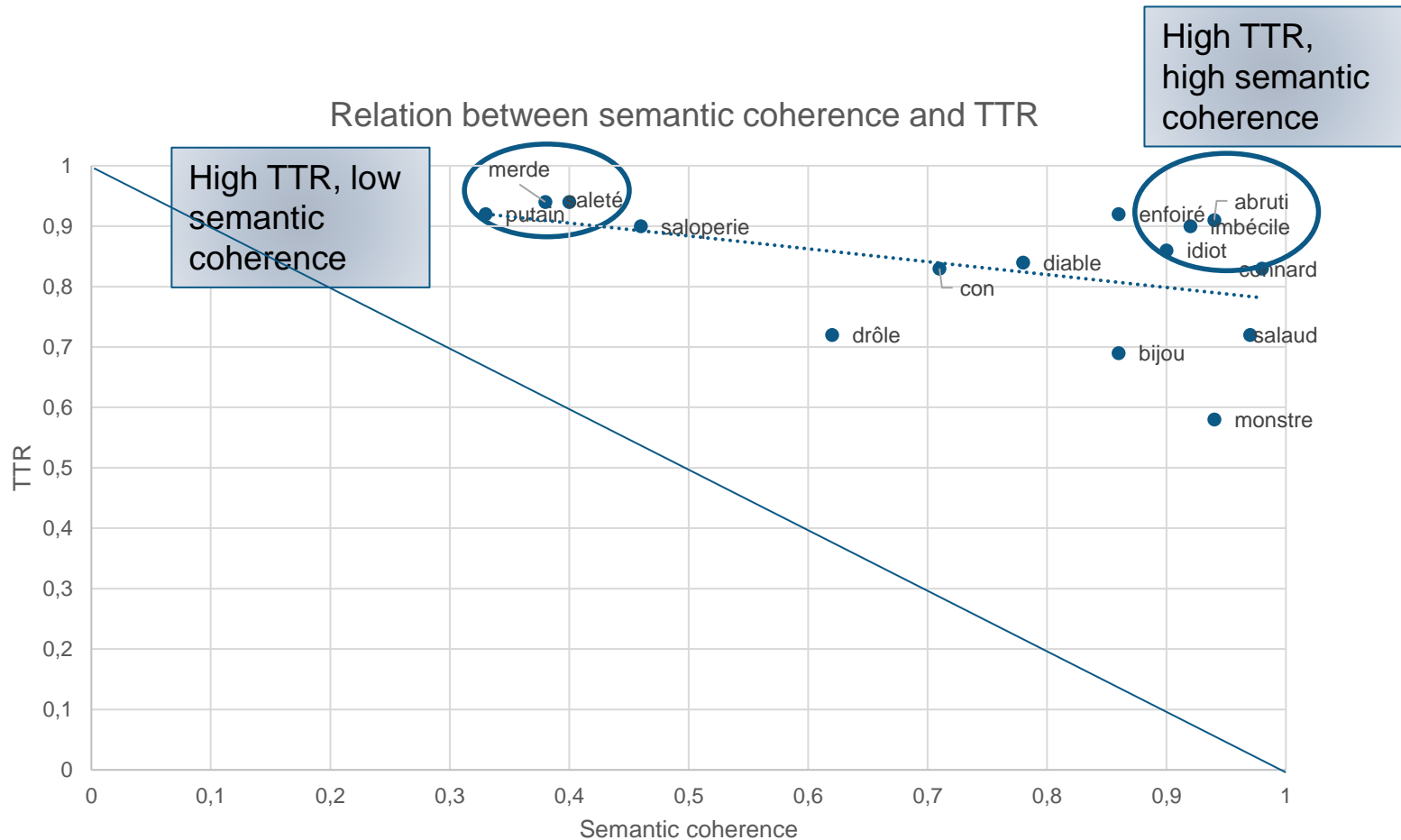
French: Productivity



High productivity (hapaxes):

- *Ce **putain** de **romantisme*** 'this fucking romanticism'
- *Une **saleté** de **bactérie*** 'a nasty bacterium'
- *Cette **merde** de **Redbull*** 'this crap of Redbull'

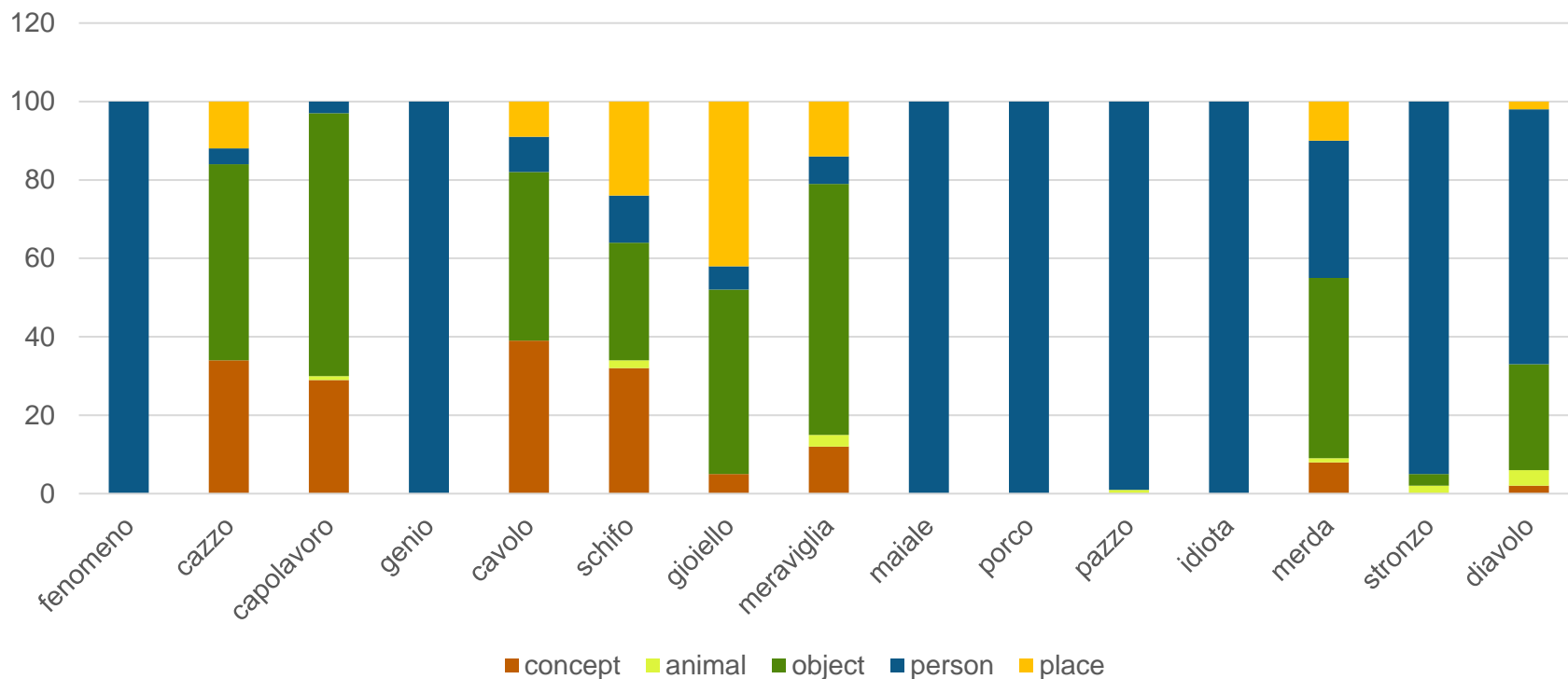
French: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence



Spearman $r_s = -0.53$ ($p = .04$)

→ Negative relationship between TTR and semantic coherence (but lower significance score than in Dutch/English)

Italian: Semantics N2



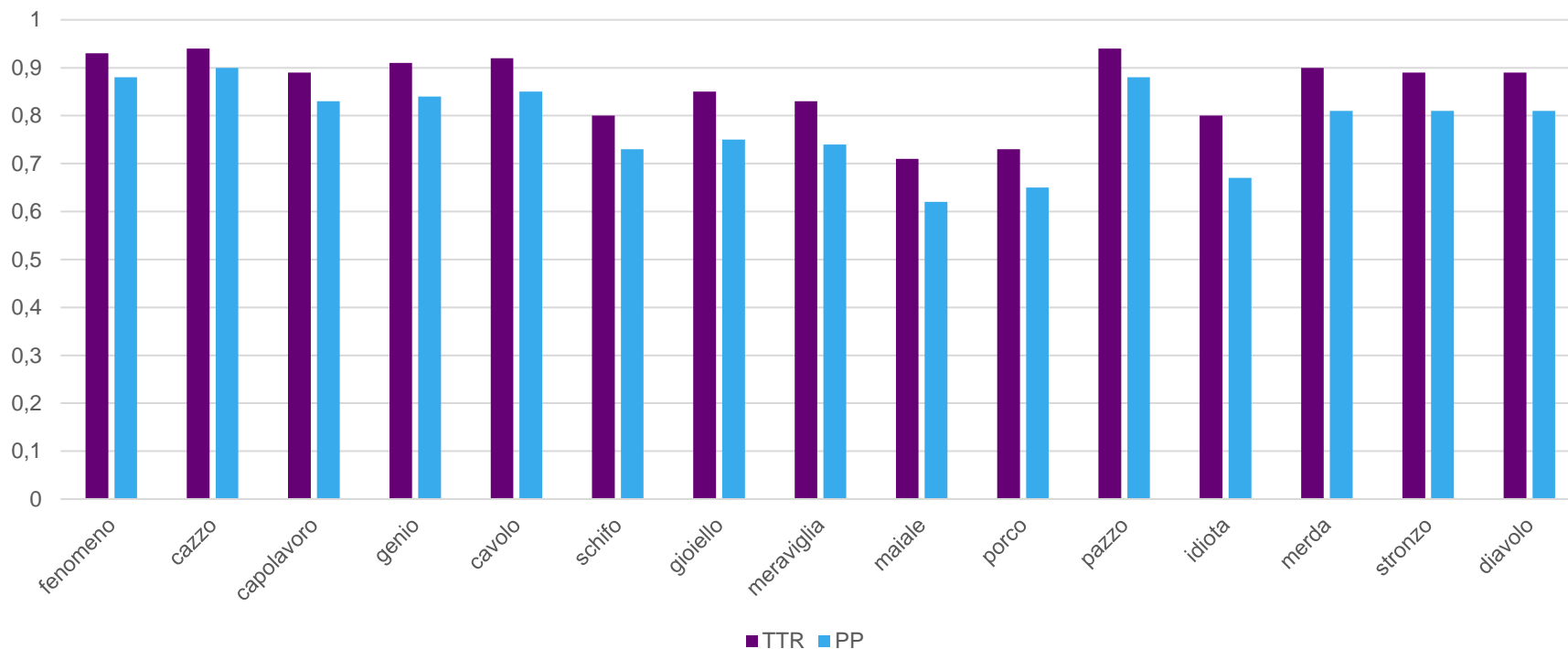
Examples with semantic variation

- *questo **schifo** di **mondo*** (n=9)
'this disgust of world'
- *quel **gioiello** di **città*** (n=6)
'that jewel of a city'
- *questa **meraviglia** di **torta*** (n=5)
'this wonder of a cake'

Examples with semantic specialization

- *quel **fenomeno** di **Cancelo*** (n=4)
'that phenomenon of my Cancelo'
- *quel **genio** di **mia madre*** (n=3)
'that genius of my mother'
- *quell'**idiota** del **mio ex*** (n=5)
'that idiot of my ex husband'

Italian: Productivity



- **High productivity (hapaxes):**

- *quel **genio** di **ministro***

‘that genius of ministry’

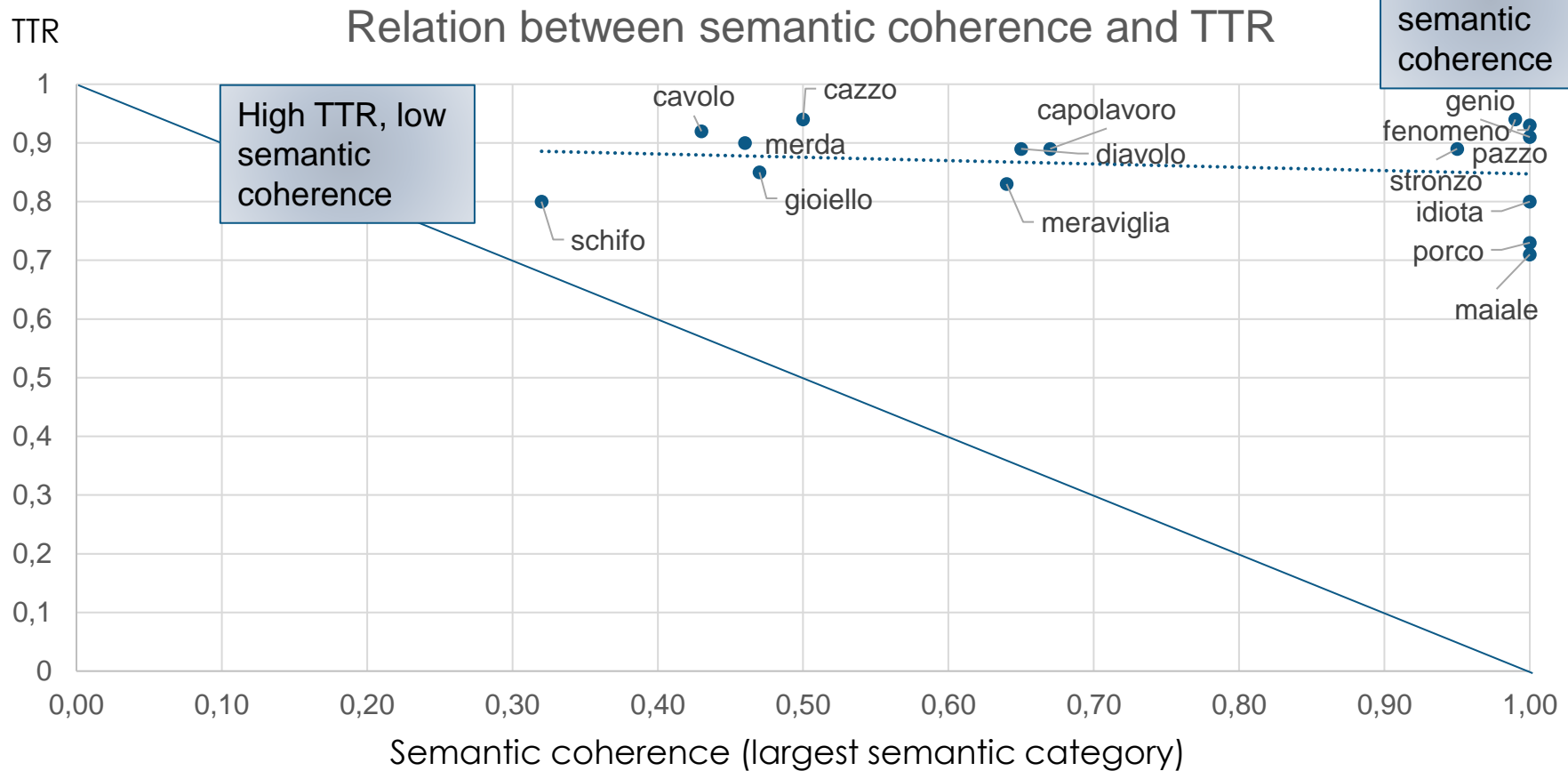
- *questo **schifo** di **strada***

‘this disgust of a road’

- *quella **meraviglia** di **auto***

‘that wonder of a car’

Italian: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?



Spearman $r_s = -0.16$ ($p = .580$)

→ No relationship between TTR and 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 micro-constructions with respect to semantic specialization and productivity

Discussion and conclusions

- **RQ2: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?**
 - **Inverse correlation between productivity and semantic coherence confirmed for Germanic languages**
 - High productivity and low semantic coherence (= flexible schemas)
 - DU [*een pracht/droom van een N*] (ameliorative evaluation)
 - ENG [*a beast of a N*] (mostly ameliorative evaluation)
 - Low productivity and high semantic coherence (= fixed schemas)
 - DU [*een boom van een PERSON*]
 - ENG [*a whale of a CONCEPT*]

Discussion and conclusions

- **RQ2: Relation between productivity and semantic coherence?**
 - **But also, exceptions to this tendency:**
 - In **Italian** there is no inverse correlation between productivity and semantic coherence
 - All analyzed micro-constructions are productive, regardless of the degree of semantic coherence
 - IT [*quel genio di* PERSON]: high productivity + high semantic coherence
 - **French** has an in-between status:
 - Inverse correlation confirmed, but large group of micro-constructions that combine high TTR and high degree of semantic coherence
 - FR [*ce(t) idiot/imbécile/enfoiré/abruti/connard de* PERSON]
- **A semantically constrained construction can still be productive!**
(↔ Barðdal 2008: 39)

Future areas of investigation

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!’*
- *Où elle est **cette bordel de merde de putain de ceinture orange à la con?** ‘Where the fuck is this fucking orange belt?’*

Grammaticalization of taboo words into intensifiers

- *Puoi chiudere **quella cazzo di bocca** ‘you can close that fucking mouth’*
- ***A hell/heck of a lot of money***
- *Le prochain chapitre est **putain de long** ‘the next chapter is fucking long’*

References

- Aarts, B. (1994). The syntax of binominal noun phrases in English. *Dutch Working Papers in English Language and Linguistics* 30, 1-28.
- Aarts, B. (1998). Binominal noun phrases in English. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 9(1), 117-158.
- Alinei, M. (1971), Il tipo sintagmatico *quel matto di Giorgio*. In M. Medici & R. Simone (eds.), *La grammatica trasformazionale italiana*, Roma, Bulzoni: 1-12.
- Barðdal, J. (2008). *Productivity: Evidence from case and argument structure in Icelandic*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Foolen, A. (2004). Expressive binominal NPs in Germanic and Romance languages. In: G. Radden & K.-U. Panther (red.), *Studies in linguistic motivation*. Berlijn: De Gruyter, 75-100.
- Larrivé, P. (1994). Quelques hypothèses sur les structures syntaxique et sémantique de *Ce fripon de valet*. *Revue québécoise de linguistique* 23(2), 101-113.
- Paardekooper, P.C. 1956. Een schat van een kind. *De nieuwe taalgids* 49. 93-99.
- Piunno (in press) *Quel genio di lingua*. Analisi quantitativa e qualitativa delle costruzioni fraseologiche valutative dell'italiano e confronto con lo spagnolo e il francese. In E. Lavric, C. Konecny, C. Konzett-Firth & M. Messner (eds.). *Actes du IXe Colloque International 'Linguistique contrastive germano-romane et intraromane'*, Berlin: Frank & Timme.
- Regula, M. (1965). Zur Analyse der Fügung *ce fripon de valet*. *Linguistica* 7/1, 57-59
- ten Wolde, E. (2023). *The English Binominal Noun Phrase: A Cognitive-Functional Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simone, R. (in press), On Light Words. In A. Pompei, E. Lombardi Vallauri & V. Piunno (eds.) *Temi e argomenti. Omaggio a Lunella Mereu*, Rome: Roma Tre Press.
- Tutescu M. (1969). Le type nominal *ce fripon de valet*. *Revue de linguistique romane* 33, 299-316.
- Van Gothem, K. (2023). *Een pracht van een constructie vs. een prachtconstructie*. Een vergelijkende corpusstudie van de syntactische en morfologische Expressieve Binominale Constructie. *Nederlandse Taalkunde* 28(2), 325-348.
- Vallaro, M. (1992), A proposito della presenza in arabo del tipo sintagmatico «quello stupidodel professore» , *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 11 , 117-138.
- Verhagen, A. (2005). Constructiegrammatica en 'usage-based' taalkunde. *Nederlandse Taalkunde* 10, 197-222.

