1. The Syntax of Tswefap Property Concept Terms

- Some property concept terms in Tswefap are attributive adjectives that modify the noun. (1a)
- Others are verbs that serve as the predicate of the sentence and occur with standard verbal morphology, such as aspect marking. (2a)
- The verbs and adjectives are not interchangeable, (1b) vs. (2a) and (2b) vs. (1a), and they are often not morphologically related, mezhwe ‘small’ vs. kho ‘be small’

(1a) a. [Mehwe mi] a ‘tsuk nkonkum
   small person FACT eat fufu
   ‘The small person ate fufu.’
b. * [Mih yoh] a mezhwe
   person DEM FACT small
   Intended: ‘That person is small.’

(2a) a. [Mih yoh] a kho
   person DEM FACT be small
   Intended: ‘That person is small.’
b. * [Khoj mi] a ‘tsuk nkonkum
   be small person FACT eat fufu
   Intended: ‘The small person ate fufu.’

- Tswefap utilizes an ‘exceed-comparative in Stassen’s (1985) typology and the comparative morpheme /tege/ ‘to pass’ appears as a verb in a serial verb construction.

(3) Nhewnehwo a seh /tege/ Chimi
   Kuamo FACT be tall CONSEC-pass Chimi
   ‘Kuamo is taller than Chimi.’

2. Verbs with Degree Arguments

- Tswefap property concept terms that are verbs show clear evidence for taking degree arguments (they are type <d,<e,t>> and allowing abstraction over degrees (positive settings for Beck et al.’s (2009) Degree Semantics Parameter and Degree Abstraction Parameter)
- Evidence for degrees comes from the availability of measure phrase的不同s (4), and degree-denoting expressions used as the standard of comparison

(4) Chimi a seh pu ta’ tern n-tege /tege/ Nhewnehwo
   Chimi FACT be tall with our head CONSEC-pass Kuamo
   ‘Chimi is one hour taller than Kuamo.’
- Evidence for degree abstraction comes from direct measure phrases (5), degree questions (6), subcomparatives (7), Heim 2000-style scope ambiguities (8), and negative island effects

(5) Chimi a /tege/ kilo ghap
   Chimi FACT be heavy kilo ten
   ‘Chimi weighs ten kilos.’ (Lit. ‘Chimi is ten kilos heavy.’)

(6) a. Chimi a seh nbele pa’lsic
   Chimi FACT be tall QUANT low
   ‘How tall is Chimi?’

b. * Chimi a seh /tege/ nbele
   Chimi FACT be tall CONSEC-pass like rope Kuamo
   ‘Chimi is taller than Kuamo’s rope is long.’

(7) a. *Yi ne unhkho nge pa yoh loh klo sehte ne yeh pege seh
   ‘It is required that building DEM take exactly centimeter YET two be tall n-tege pa yoh le
   CONSEC-pass like 36g INF be now LE
   ‘It is required that the building be exactly 2m tall or it is now.’
   You have to build a model building for a contest. Your building is 2.98m tall.
   ✓ Context 1: Yv > max
   The rules state the building must be 3m tall, no more, no less.
   ✓ Context 2: max > Yv
   The rules state the building must be at least 3m tall, but can be more.

3. Adjectives without Degrees

- Attributive adjectives in Tswefap do not show evidence for taking degree arguments
- Direct measure phrases are ungrammatical with attributive adjectives, (9), and a relative clause with a gradable verb must be used instead, (10)

(9) a. [Sesge] meytih pege mi a ‘tsuk nkonkum
   tail meter two person FACT eat fufu
   Intended: ‘The two meter tail person ate fufu.’

b. * [Mi yoh] a seh meytih pege
   person DEM FACT small
   ‘That person is small.’

(10) a. Mi [yi seh meytih pege] a le ‘tsuk nkonkum
   person REL be tail meter two
   REL ASP eat fufu
   ‘The person that is two meters tall ate fufu.’

- The comparative morpheme cannot combine with an attributive adjective, (11), and instead must be used with a verb in a relative clause, (12)

(11) * [Sesge] (n-tege) /tege/ mbele wohlo’i
   a ‘tsuk nkonkum
   CONSEC-pass everyone person FACT eat fufu
   ‘The taller/tallest person ate fufu.’

(12) Mi [yi seh n-tege] /tege/ mbele wohlo’i
   a ‘tsuk nkonkum
   person REL be tall CONSEC-pass everyone
   REL FACT eat fufu
   ‘The person that is taller than everyone ate fufu.’

- Yoruba (Benue-Congo, Nigeria) is like Tswefap in having an exceed-comparative and gradable verbs and attributive adjectives (but adjectives are clearly morphologically derived from verbs)
- The Yoruba comparative morpheme is inapplicable with adjectives, which Howell (2013) notes could potentially be due to a syntactic restriction if the comparative verb subcategories for another verb rather than an adjective
- In Tswefap, the additional incomparability of measure phrases with attributive adjectives suggests that a semantic account is simpler than a syntactic one
- Direct measure phrases are ungrammatical with all gradable predicates in Yoruba, regardless of category

4. Gradability across Syntactic Category

- In the absence of evidence that gradable predicates can occur with degree morphology, Bochnak (2015) argues that the most parsimonious solution is to assume they lack degree arguments
- If we assume that Tswefap adjectives are simply type <d,<e,t>> predicates rather than taking an additional degree argument, this provides a straightforward solution for ruling out their co-occurrence with measure phrases and the comparative morpheme
- To maintain that adjectives take degree arguments, we would have to assume that a silent pas morpheme (Cresswell, 1976) obligatorily occurs with all gradable adjectives
- In contrast to adjectives, gradable verbs do take a degree argument and are type <d,<e,t>>

The Key Contrast between Verbs and Adjectives

- Gradable verbs in Tswefap occur with a range of degree expressions, which suggests that they take degree arguments and are of type <d,<e,t>>
- Tswefap attributive adjectives cannot occur with degree expressions and can be more straightforwardly analyzed as <d,e,t> predicates

Conclusions

- The evidence from the distribution of degree expressions with attributive adjectives and gradable verbs suggests that gradability may not be encoded in the same way across syntactic category even within a single language
- This raises the possibility that for languages like English we need not assume the same type of treatment for gradable nouns and verbs as is assumed for adjectives
- The fact that adjectives are of type <d,<e,t>> in Tswefap while gradable verbs are of type <d,<e,t>> also suggests that the category adjective has no privileged status with respect to gradability or utilizing degree arguments (pace Doetjes, 2008)

References


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The Puzzle

We usually think of adjectives as the prototypical gradable category. Tswefap (Bamileke Narrow Grassfields: Cameroon) property concept terms can be expressed as verbs or adjectives. While the verbs take a degree argument, there is no evidence that the adjectives do.

Contact Information

eclem@berkeley.edu
http://www.linguistics.berkeley.edu/~eclem/