



ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES IN TSWEFAP: VAGUE PREDICATES IN A LANGUAGE WITH DEGREES

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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.

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. *khoh* 'be small'

(1) a. [Mezhwe mi] a tseuk nkumnkum
small person FACT eat fufu
'The small person ate fufu.'

b. * [Mi yoh] a mezhwe
person DEM FACT small
Intended: 'That person is small.'

(2) a. [Mi yoh] a khoh
person DEM FACT be.small
'That person is small.'

b. * [Khoh mi] a tseuk nkumnkum
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 *tchege* 'to pass' appears as a verb in a serial verb construction

(3) Nkwehwoh a seh n-tchege 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 $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$) 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 differentials, (4), and degree-denoting expressions used as the standard of comparison

(4) Chimi a seh pu ta' tswe n-tchege Nkwehwoh
Chimi FACT be.tall with one head CONSEC-pass Kuamo
'Chimi is one head 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 tsey kilo ghap
Chimi FACT be.heavy kilo ten
'Chimi weighs ten kilos.' (*Lit.* 'Chimi is ten kilos heavy.')

(6) Chimi a seh ndohk pa'lieh
Chimi FACT be.tall QUANT how
'How tall is Chimi?'

(7) Chimi a seh n-tchege pa' nkhe Nkwehwoh ne seh a
Chimi FACT be.tall CONSEC-pass like rope Kuamo INF be.tall A
'Chimi is taller than Kuamo's rope is long.'

(8) Yi me ntchohk nge pa' yoh loh kwa' sehntimeyteh yeh pege seh
it.is.required that building DEM take exactly centimeter YEH two be.tall
n-tchege pa' yi ne mbi ndeh le
CONSEC-pass like 3SG INF be now LE
'It is required that the building be exactly 2cm taller than it is now.'
You have to build a model building for a contest. Your building is 2.98m tall.
✓ Context 1: $\forall w > \max$
The rules state the building must be 3m tall, no more, no less.
?✓ Context 2: $\max > \forall w$
The rules state the building must be at least 3m tall, but can be more.

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 $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$
- Tswefap attributive adjectives cannot occur with degree expressions and can be more straightforwardly analyzed as $\langle e, t \rangle$ predicates

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) * [Sesege meyteh pege] mi a tseuk nkumnkum
tall meter two person FACT eat fufu
Intended: 'The two meter tall person ate fufu.'

(10) Mi [yi seh meyteh pege a] le tseuk nkumnkum
person REL be.tall 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) * [Sesege (n-)tchege (mbeh wohloh)] mi a tseuk nkumnkum
tall CONSEC-pass everyone person FACT eat fufu
'The taller/tallest person ate fufu.'

(12) Mi [yi seh n-tchege mbeh wohloh a] a tseuk nkumnkum
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 incompatible with adjectives, which Howell (2013) notes could potentially be due to a syntactic restriction if the comparative verb subcategorizes for another verb rather than an adjective
- In Tswefap, the additional incompatibility 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 $\langle e, t \rangle$ 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 *pos* morpheme (Cresswell, 1976) obligatorily occurs with all gradable adjectives
- In contrast to adjectives, gradable verbs do take a degree argument and are type $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$

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 $\langle e, t \rangle$ in Tswefap while gradable verbs are of type $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ also suggests that the category adjective has no privileged status with respect to gradability or utilizing degree arguments (pace Doetjes, 2008)

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