

Degree Words: Modifiers or Functional Head Elements?

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DegP (Degree Phrase), as a functional projection (e.g., Corver 1997), has been shown to be semantically convenient, since it represents gradable XP ($\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$), which is different from other predicates ($\langle e, t \rangle$); and it also seems to be syntactically harmless, since it does not make troubles to our current understanding of syntactic computation in general. However, the elements that are most likely to be considered to establish DegP, i.e., degree words, have been treated as modifiers of other categories (AP or stative VP) traditionally. So long as the traditional analysis remains unchallenged, we are not confident in the independent status of DegP in syntax. This is similar to the situation that if articles were modifiers of NPs, they would not head DP. The goal of this talk is to show that in Mandarin Chinese, degree words must head an independent functional projection, since they behave differently from modifiers in syntax.

Fact ❶ Degree words are in complementary distribution with reduplicate adjectives. In languages such as Austronesian languages, intensification is encoded by reduplication of adjectives, instead of degree words. In Chinese, both strategies are available, but they never co-occur.

(1) Daiwei gezi {gaogao de/ hen gao/*hen gaogao}.

David height tall-RED PRT/very tall/ very tall-red 'David's height is tall.'

Only a functional head that selects X, rather than a modifier of X, may be in complementary distribution with certain morphology of X. For instance, the presence of a modal excludes an aspect inflection on a verb, and the former must be in a functional head position.

Fact ❷ Degree words show independent selection properties. In syntax, if X is an independent category, it selects a special type of element, and the selection is not covered by other categories; and moreover, it is selected by certain types of element, but not other types. It is well recognized that degree words are combined with gradable stative XP only, and this constraint is not seen on other elements. In addition, a phrase with a degree word may not occur in a position that is exclusively for nominals in the language. The causee position following the causative marker *ba* (2a), the theme position preceding the passive marker *bei* (2b), and the argument position preceding the raising verb *kanqilai* 'seem' (2c) are such positions.

(2) a. Wo ba (*hen) chengshi dang-zuo yi zhong meide.

I BA very honest regard-as one CL virtue 'I regard to be honest as a virtue.'

b. Dui guke (*hen) rexin bei laoban renwei feichang zhongyao.

to customer very warm PASS boss think very important

'To be warm to customers is regarded as very important by the boss.'

c. (*hen) naixin kanqilai bing bu-nan.

very patient seem rather not-difficult 'To be patient seems not to be difficult.'

If the nominal positions belong to the domain of D, the data above indicate that D does not select a degree word expression. The contrast in (2) indicates that an XP and its combination with a degree word have different syntactic distributions, falsifying an adjunct analysis of degree words.

Fact ❸ Degree words block the A-not-A yes-no question dependency. An A-not-A form is licensed by a question feature in Infl/C (Huang 1982; Soh 2005). (3a) shows that the adverb *pingchang* 'usually' may precede the A-not-A form of *qu* 'go', whereas (3b) shows that the degree word may not precede the A-not-A form of *xihuan* 'like'.

(3) a. Daiwei pingchang qu-bu-qu juyuan?

David often go-not-go theater

'Does David often go to the theater?'

b. Daiwei (*hen) xi-bu-xihuan juyuan?

David very like-not-like theater

'Does David like the theater?'

Fact ❹ Degree words have an independent question form. *Duome* 'how much' is used for asking the degree of a gradable property. It is different from the question forms for manner modifiers,

such as *ruhe* ‘how’ and *zenyang* ‘how’.

- (4) a. Daiwei (you) {duome/*zenyang} gao? b. Daiwei {zenyang/*duome} zuofan?
David have how/how tall David how/how cook
‘How tall is David?’ ‘How does David cook?’

Fact ⑤ Degree words may have a place-holder. Generally speaking, different degree words express different values of the degree of a gradable property. However, *hen* ‘very’ has two versions: one may bear stress and may have the suffix *-wei* if it precedes a disyllabic form (Hou 1998), functioning as an intensifier like English *very*; and the other neither bears stress nor takes *-wei*, not expressing any specific degree (XHXL 1982: 243). The occurrence of the second use of *hen* excludes a possible comparative reading, as seen in (5b). No modifier denotes an underspecified meaning, or has a place-holder, and thus degree words are not modifiers.

- (5) a. Daiwei gao. b. Daiwei hen gao.
David tall David very tall
‘David is taller than others.’ ‘David is tall.’

While arguing for the Deg head status of degree words, I falsify three alternative analyses of *hen* ‘very’. The POS-marker analysis (Sybesma 1999; Kennedy 1999) is challenged by the fact that in the absence of a degree word, examples like (6a) encode POS, but the construction rejects *hen*, as seen in (6b). My account of (6b) is that the measure phrase specifies a value denoted by the adjective and thus the whole phrase may not be selected by *hen* (pace Corver 2009: 72).

- (6) a. Na du qiang gao-da san mi. #Tai ai le.
that CL wall tall-reach three meter too short PRT
‘That wall is as tall as three meters. #It’s too short.’
b. *Na du qiang hen gao-da san mi.
that CL wall very tall-reach three meter

The predicate-creator analysis (Huang 2006) claims that Chinese adjectives denote <e>, and they are changed into type <e,t> by *hen*. The analysis however does not capture the facts that in many constructions adjectives function as predicates without *hen* (Liu 2010) and that like degree words in all languages *hen* selects gradable expressions only (6b). The V-creator analysis (Grano 2012) claims that *hen* provides [V] to adjectives. However, the cluster *hen-Adj* does not behave like a verbal element: it may not undergo A-not-A formation (**hen-bu-hen*) and may not license a complement to its right (Huang et al. 2009: 22), as seen in (7). The analysis also has Huang’s second problem. Also, it cannot explain data like (8), where even a VP needs *hen*.

- (7) a. *Zhe ge gongzuo (hen) heshi ni. b. Zhe ge gongzuo [dui ni] [hen heshi].
this CL job very suitable you this CL job to you very suitable
‘This job is suitable for you.’

- (8) Daiwei e de *(hen) xiang chi yi ge mantou.

David hunger DE very want eat one CL bun ‘D was so hungry that he wanted to eat a bun.’

Selected references

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