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SANTA CRUZ

**PROJECTING THE ADJECTIVE:  
THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF GRADABILITY AND COMPARISON**

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Christopher Kennedy  
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The dissertation of Christopher Kennedy  
is approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Donka Farkas, co-Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
William Ladusaw, co-Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sandra Chung

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## Projecting the Adjective

### The Syntax and Semantics of Gradability and Comparison

Christopher Kennedy

September 1997

Directed by Professors Donka Farkas and William Ladusaw

#### Abstract

This dissertation argues that gradable adjectives like *bright*, *dense* and *short* denote *measure functions*—functions from objects to abstract representations of measurement, or *scales* and *degrees*. This proposal is shown to provide a foundation for principled explanations of a wide range of syntactic and semantic properties of gradable adjectives and the constructions in which they appear, ranging from the syntactic distribution of gradable adjectives to the scopal characteristics of comparatives and the empirical effects of adjectival polarity.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the core semantic properties of gradable adjectives and outlines the two primary approaches to their meaning that have appeared in the literature. Building on a number of empirical observations, the chapter reaches two conclusions: first, the meaning of gradable adjectives should be characterized in terms of scales and degrees, and second, the traditional analysis of gradable adjectives as relations between objects and degrees and complex degree constructions such as comparatives as expressions that quantify over degrees does not account for the scopal properties of comparatives.

Chapter 2 presents the analysis of gradable adjectives as measure functions and argues that gradable adjectives combine with a degree morphology to generate properties of individuals, which are defined in terms of relations between two degrees. This analysis not only provides an explanation for the facts discussed in chapter 1, but also supports a robust account of the compositional semantics of a range of degree constructions within a syntactic

framework in which gradable adjectives project extended functional structure headed by degree morphology.

Finally, chapter 3 investigates the ontology of degrees and the characterization of adjectival polarity, focusing on the anomaly of comparatives constructed out of antonymous pairs of adjectives and the monotonicity properties of polar adjectives. The facts are shown to support an ontology in which degrees are formalized as intervals on a scale, or *extents*, and a structural distinction is made between two sorts of extents: positive extents and negative extents. This distinction forms the basis for a sortal characterization of adjectival polarity.

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