Conclusion

The primary claim of this dissertation is that the meaning of a gradable adjective should be characterized in terms of an abstract representation of measurement, or scale. Building on the hypothesis that the semantic function of a gradable adjective is to project an object onto a scale, I argued that gradable adjectives should be analyzed as measure functions—functions from objects to scalar values or degrees. This approach was shown not only to support a principled analysis of cross-polar examples, but also to explain the phenomenon of cross-polar anomaly. These facts were accounted for by expanding the domain of gradable adjectives to include partial ordering relations on the objects in their domains.

The conclusion that the meaning of gradable adjectives must be characterized in terms of scales and degrees was arrived at by considering a number of facts (including incommensurability, cross-polar anomaly, the distribution of measure phrases, and the interpretation of comparison of deviation constructions) that receive a natural explanation only if scales are introduced into the ontology and the interpretation of gradable adjectives is characterized in terms of such abstract objects. However, a number of facts called into question the traditional scalar analysis of gradable adjectives as relations between objects and degrees. In particular, a component of this analysis—the assumption that comparative constructions quantify over degrees—failed to explain the limited scope of comparatives. These facts were accounted for by reanalyzing gradable adjectives as measure functions and degree constructions as properties of individuals, removing the relational component and the degree argument from the meaning of the adjective and incorporating these constituents into the meaning of degree morphology.

A central claim of this analysis is that all propositions in which the main predication is a degree construction headed by a gradable adjective can be analyzed in terms of three semantic constituents: a degree relation, introduced by a degree morpheme, a reference value, derived by applying the function denoted by the adjective to the target of predication, and a standard value. Focusing on comparative and absolute degree constructions, in which the standard value is a degree and the degree morphology introduces a partial ordering relation, I showed that this approach supports a straightforward compositional semantics for a syntactic analysis of degree constructions in which a gradable adjective projects extended functional structure headed by degree morphology, as in Abney 1987, Corver 1990, 1997, and Grimshaw 1991. An important question that remains to be addressed is whether the approach can be extended to other degree constructions, such as how A questions and anaphoric this/that A constructions, as well as enough and so...that constructions in which the degree morpheme introduces a causal relation and the "standard value" is not a degree, but rather a proposition.

Finally, I addressed the question of the ontology of scales and degrees in more detail, using the phenomenon of cross-polar anomaly as the empirical basis for the investigation. Observing that this anomaly is unexplained if degrees are formalized as points on a scale, I argued that degrees should instead be characterized as intervals on a scale, or extents (as originally proposed in Seuren 1978), and that a structural distinction should be made between two sorts of extents: positive extents, which range from the lower end of the scale to some positive point, and negative extents, which range from some point to the upper end of the scale. This distinction was needed to accommodate a number of facts calling into question the conventional scalar analysis of gradable adjectives as relations between objects and degrees. In particular, a component of this analysis—the assumption that comparative constructions quantify over degrees—is not supported by the introduction of degree morphology.

In short, the approach taken in this dissertation provides a principled analysis of gradable adjectives and their use in comparative and absolute degree constructions. It supports a straightforward compositional semantics for a syntactic analysis of degree constructions, and it offers a principled explanation of cross-polar anomaly. Finally, it provides a principled explanation of the different ordering properties of positive and negative adjectives in both the comparative and absolute forms, as well as the interpretation of comparison of deviation constructions. The approach taken in this dissertation is thus a significant contribution to the study of gradable adjectives and their use in language.