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

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in LINGUISTICS by Christopher Kennedy

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that gradable adjectives like bright, dense, and short denote measure functions—functions from objects to abstract representations of scales and degrees. The proposal provides an explanation for the facts discussed in Chapter 1, but also supports a robust account of the compositional semantics of gradable adjectives within a framework in which gradable adjectives project extended functional structure headed by degree morphology.

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 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 gradable constructions within a syntactic framework.

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 monotonic properties of polar adjectives. The facts are shown to support a structural distinction between two sorts of degrees: positive degrees and negative degrees, which play a role in the syntactic distribution of gradable adjectives and the construction of comparative and superlative adverbs.

This dissertation argues that gradable adjectives like bright, dense, and short denote measure functions—functions from objects to abstract representations of scales and degrees.
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