

The Semantics of Comparative Correlatives and Adverbial Comparatives in Chinese

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I discuss, reporting on joint work with Xiao Li (Queens College, CUNY), Mandarin Chinese *yue ... yue* constructions as illustrated in (1). These are the counterparts to *the more ... the more* constructions in English, as illustrated in the translation of (1), which have been dubbed ‘comparative correlatives’ (CCs).

- (1) Pingguo **yue** da **yue** tian.
apple big sweet
‘The bigger an apple is, the sweeter it is.’

I review Beck’s (1997) semantics for CCs and a specific proposal for Chinese CCs in Lin (2007), which I adopt in its essentials. For (1), this semantics states that the set of pairs of situations such that the degree of bigness of the apple in the first is greater than that of the apple in the second is a subset of the set of pairs of situations such that the degree of sweetness of the apple in the first is greater than that of the apple in the second.

I then discuss instances of *yue ... yue* constructions such as those in (2), which correspond more closely to so-called ‘adverbial comparatives’, as illustrated by the English *more and more* construction in the translation of (2).

- (2) John **yue** pao **yue** kuai.
J. run fast
‘John ran faster and faster.’

I argue that the semantics of adverbial comparatives differ in a significant manner from those of CCs, in that the former necessarily refer to a temporal ordering relation while the latter don’t. I show, nevertheless, that if we identify *time* as one of the degree parameters appealed to in the semantics of CCs, the existing CC semantics will automatically yield the correct semantics for adverbial comparatives. This is a desirable result since the two constructions are closely related in Mandarin Chinese (if not identical).

Specifically, I will propose that Adjectives do not contain a time argument but only a degree and that Verbs do not contain a degree argument but only a time. I propose a unified semantics for the morpheme *yue*, in which it can combine with any predicate of an orderable type, where this is defined as a type which allows for an order to be defined on the elements in its domain, and includes the types of degrees and times. When *yue* combines with an Adjective, it will bind its degree argument and construct the set of pairs of situations such that the degree of one is greater than that of the other, while when *yue* combines with a Verb, it will bind its time argument and yield the set of pairs of situations such that one is later than the other. Thus, the necessarily temporal ordering reading of adverbial comparatives will result.

References

- Beck, Sigrid. 1997. ‘On the semantics of comparative conditionals’. L&P 20: 229-71
Lin, Jo-Wang. 2007. ‘On the semantics of comparative correlatives in Mandarin Chinese’. JoS 24: 169-213