The semantics of comparisons in Mandarin Chinese

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the three fundamental uses of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese. It aims to answer, without a morphological distinction between the so-called positive and comparative forms (e.g., tall vs. taller), how comparisons are encoded in Mandarin Chinese, and how distinctive interpretations are derived and understood by the users of the language.

As illustrated in (1), the three fundamental uses of gradable adjectives are the positive use (see (1a)), the comparative use (see (1b)), and the use in measurement constructions (see (1c)). In these English examples, evidently, the comparative form of gradable adjectives (e.g., longer) is morphologically more complex than the form used in the positive use and measurement constructions (e.g., long).

(1)  
   a. This rope is long. Positive use  
   b. This rope is longer than that rod is. Comparative  
   c. This rope is 6 meters long. Measurement construction

Cross-linguistically, it has been widely acknowledged that the morphology of the comparative form is usually not less complex than that of the positive form (see Table (2) from Grano 2012; see also e.g., Klein 1980, Bobaljik 2012).

(2)  
Morphosyntactic relationship between positive and comparative forms cross-linguistically (from Grano 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive form</th>
<th>Comparative form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English tall</td>
<td>taller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish ard</td>
<td>arda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish alto</td>
<td>más alto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French grand</td>
<td>plus grand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swahili mrefu</td>
<td>mrefu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese takai</td>
<td>takai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intriguingly, in the formal semantics literature, there is a long-noted puzzling phenomenon: as illustrated by (3), it has been claimed that the ‘unmarked’ use of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese seems comparative, rather than positive (see (3a)), and then to convey the positive interpretation, using the form ‘hěn+Adj.’ (here hěn gāo ‘very tall’) is more preferred than simply using the gradable adjective alone (see (3b)) (see e.g., Sybesma 1999, Grano 2012).
(3) a. 张三 高
Zhāng-Sān gāo
Zhāng Sān tall(-er)
‘Zhāng Sān is taller (than someone known from context).’

b. 张三 很 高
Zhāng-Sān hěn gāo
Zhāng Sān very tall(-er)
‘Zhāng Sān is tall.’ Sybesma (1999), Grano (2012)

Are these examples shown in (3) against the generalization illustrated in Table (2)? In other words, does the contrast shown in (3) mean that in Mandarin Chinese, the positive form (which seems to be hěn gāo) is morphologically more complex than the comparative form (which seems to be simply gāo)? Does this mean that the semantics of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese is inherently comparative?

Grano (2012)’s answer to all these questions is ‘no’. Grano (2012) proposes that in Mandarin Chinese, both positive tall and comparative taller are spelt out as gāo, resulting in the same pattern as that of Japanese and Swahili. However, comparative gāo has a silent comparative morpheme (equivalent to English -er) that enables gāo to project to the TP level, but positive gāo needs the assistance of overt elements like hěn (‘very’) to project to TP. Essentially, what makes the morphosyntax of positive gāo seemingly more complex is due to a distinction between a syntactically visible silent morpheme (used along with comparative gāo) and a syntactically invisible interpretation rule (a type-shifting operation for positive gāo).

In this paper, I argue against Grano (2012)’s account and propose a new analysis that still validates the generalization in Table (2). In a nutshell, I propose that the notion of comparison underlies all the three uses of gradable adjectives.1 The semantics proper of gradable adjectives is to relate and compare the measurement of an individual with a standard value, yielding a certain difference, and the three uses of gradable adjectives differ with regard to their distinctive standard and difference. I.e., for gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese, there is no so-called morphosyntactic difference between the positive and comparative forms. Thus, the use of gradable adjectives is inherently ambiguous, and it is the use of other elements (e.g., hěn) that helps to disambiguate (e.g., by selecting a certain kind of standard or difference), so that the non-use of these disambiguating elements leads to a seemingly ‘default’ interpretation. Overall, my proposed account is purely semantic and pragmatic, irrespective of any syntactic factors.

In the following, I first argue against Grano (2012)’s account (Section 2). I present my own proposal in Section 3 and discuss implications in Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

2. Challenging cases for Grano (2012)’s account

I focus on three cases that challenge Grano (2012)’s account. First, the ‘unmarked’ comparative use of (3a) forms the very foundation for Grano (2012)’s account, but when uttered out of blue, (3a) does not sound perfectly unambiguous. (3a) can be ambiguous between a positive and a comparative reading, depending on context. Then, when context is fleshed out, the interpretation of gāo in (4) and (5) is unambiguously positive and comparative, respectively.

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1Presumably, this claim holds not only for Mandarin Chinese, but also cross-linguistically (see Oda 2005 for a similar view for gradable adjectives in Japanese). However, a thorough cross-linguistic investigation is beyond the scope of the current paper and has to be left for future research. I focus on Mandarin Chinese phenomena in this paper and briefly discuss English data in Section 4.
(4) a. 这些孩子们里就张三高
zhè-xiē hài-zi lǐ jiù Zhāng-Sān gāo
these kids among/inside only Zhāng Sān is tall
‘Among these kids, only Zhāng Sān is tall.’

b. 张三不高？张三（不高）
Zhāng-Sān bù gāo Zhāng-Sān (bù) gāo
Zhāng-Sān tall(-er) NEG tall(-er) Zhāng-Sān NEG tall(-er)
‘Is Zhāng Sān tall? Zhāng Sān is (not) tall.’

(5) 张三和李四谁高？张三高
Zhāng-Sān hé Lì-Sì shéi gāo Zhāng-Sān gāo
Zhāng-Sān and Li Sì who tall(-er) Zhāng-Sān tall(-er)
‘Between Zhāng Sān and Li Sì, who is taller? Zhāng Sān is taller.’

Liu (2010b) observes that the positive reading of a gradable adjective is often freely (i.e., without the use of hěn) available under certain conditions (like negation, focus, etc., see (4)). Based on this, Grano (2012) claims that it is crucially the presence of these conditions that satisfies the T[+V] constraint for syntactic grammaticality in Mandarin Chinese, and then he proposes that since a gradable adjective cannot satisfy this constraint itself, elements like a silent comparative morpheme -er or an explicit hěn need to be used to help it project to TP, satisfying the syntactic requirement and leading to a comparative or positive reading.

Thus, under this analysis, without the assistance of special conditions (like negation or focus) or the use of hěn, (3a) should only have an unambiguous comparative reading. This contradicts our intuition that (3a) sounds rather ambiguous when uttered out of blue.

Then, second, for sentences like (6a), which contain a measurement expression (here liǎng mǐ ‘two meters’), Grano (2012)’s analysis also predicts that for the gradable adjective cháng (‘long’) here, a silent morpheme -er is needed to satisfy the T[+V] constraint, and thus the sentence is predicted to be unambiguously comparative.

However, this prediction is again not borne out. When uttered out of blue, (6a) is ambiguous between a comparative and a measurement reading, and it seems that the measurement reading is even more readily available. Moreover, the preferred form for an unambiguous comparative reading here typically involves adding a bi-phrase or an aspectual marker le (see (6b)). The preferred addition of le is particularly puzzling for Grano (2012)’s analysis: if a silent morpheme -er already satisfies the T[+V] constraint, how can this le be licensed? What does it serve for? If silent -er and other elements like le can co-occur to satisfy the syntactic requirement, does it mean that the comparative reading is always available for any use of gradable adjectives? How can it disappear under certain conditions (see (4)) or when hěn is present (see (3b))?

(6) a. 这根绳子长两米
zhè gēn shéng-zi cháng liǎng mǐ
this classifier rope long(-er) two meter
‘This rope is 2 meters long/longer.’

b. 这根绳子（比那根）长（了）两米
zhè gēn shéng-zi (bǐ nà gēn) cháng (le) liǎng mǐ
this classifier rope COMPARE that classifier long(-er) ASPECT two meter
‘This rope is 2 meters longer (than that one).’

Finally, according to Grano (2012), when a gradable adjective is used attributively, as shown in (7a), since it no longer needs to project to TP to satisfy the T[+V] requirement, it
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does not need the assistance of *hěn* to give rise to a positive reading. Crucially, to support this view, Grano (2012) argues that this kind of prenominal modification (in (7a)) is distinct from the use of relative clauses (see (8)): relative clauses can appear either to the left or to the right of ‘numeral + classifier’, while attributives can only appear to the right of ‘numeral + classifier’ (i.e., (7b) is unacceptable if *hěn* is not added; when *hěn* is added, (7b) contains a relative clause).

(7) a. 一封 长 的 信
   yī fēng cháng de xìn
   ‘a long letter’

   b. *(很) 长 的 一封 信
   * (hěn) cháng de yī fēng xìn
   intended: ‘a long letter’

(8) a. 新 来 的 两 个 老师
   xīn lái de liǎng gè lǎo-shī
   ‘two teachers who have newly arrived’ Yip & Rimmington (2004), Grano (2012)

   b. 两 个 新 来 的 老师
   liǎng gè xīn lái de lǎo-shī
   ‘two teachers who have newly arrived’ Yip & Rimmington (2004), Grano (2012)

Presumably, this analysis only means that in (7a), *cháng de* (‘long’) can be analyzed as an attributive. This analysis does not rule out the possibility that in principle, *cháng de* in (7a) and (7b) should still be able to be analyzed as relative clauses. Moreover, when analyzed as relative clauses, *cháng de* (‘(NP) that is long/longer’) should still need a silent -er to satisfy the T[+V] constraint within relative clauses and thus be interpreted in a comparative way. However, (7a) has by no means a comparative reading, and without *hěn*, (7b) is simply unacceptable.

Overall, in order to argue that the positive form of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese does not have a heavier morphology than their comparative form, it seems that Grano (2012) ends up transferring the burden of licensing the positive reading to their syntax. This analysis predicts a comparative reading for (3a) and (6a), where actually, ambiguity arises, and it should predict ambiguous readings for (7a), which has only an unambiguous positive reading.

3. Proposal

My proposal starts with the ambiguity of (3a) and (6a): both are ambiguous between a comparative and a non-comparative use. For (3a), the comparative use seems, at least, the not less prominent one, and the more preferred form for a positive reading involves the use of *hěn* (see (3b)), while for (6a), the measurement use seems more prominent, and the more preferred form for a comparative reading involves the use of a *bì*-phrase and/or aspectual marker *le* (see (6b)).

Obviously, for gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese, no matter what kind of silent morphemes or interpretation rules we propose for them, if there is morphosyntactic unbalance between their comparative and non-comparative use, then when *hěn* or other conditions are absent, the use associated with the morphosyntactically unmarked (or less marked) form should always be more available and, in ambiguous cases, more prominent. (3a) speaks against the mor-
phosyntactic unmarkedness of the non-comparative use, while the example (6a) speaks against
the morphosyntactic unmarkedness of the comparative use. Overall, these data speak against
any morphosyntactic unbalance between the comparative and non-comparative use.

Thus, I propose that the use of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese is inherently
ambiguous, and the notion of comparison underlies all the three uses of gradable adjectives.

I analyze the semantics of gradable adjectives as a relation among three items: the com-
parison between the measurement of an individual \(x\) and a certain standard \(\sigma\) results in a dif-
fference \(\delta\) (see (9)). The three uses of gradable adjectives differ in their arguments \(\sigma\) and \(\delta\).

For the positive use, \(\sigma\) is a contextually relevant average and often overtly expressed with
the use of \(hên\) (see (3b)), and \(\delta\) is an always covert, unspecified positive value. \hên, which
marks \(\sigma\), usually appears to the left of a gradable adjective (see (3b)), but with the insertion of
particle \(de\), it can also appear to the right of a gradable adjective (see (10)).

For the comparative use, \(\sigma\) is a contextually salient standard or introduced by a \(bì\)-
phrase (see (6b)), and \(\delta\) can be a covert (see (3a)) or overt positive value (see (6a), (6b)). When
\(\delta\) is overt, it can be a numerical measurement phrase (see (6a), (6b)) or less specified (see (11)).

The measurement use is actually only available for gradable adjectives associated with a
scale that has an absolute zero point (e.g., \(gâo\) (‘tall’), \(châng\) (‘long’), see Sassoon 2010). Thus,
while (6a) is ambiguous between a comparative and a measurement reading, (12) is unambigu-
ously comparative: the scale associated with \(duân\) (‘short’) has no absolute zero point, so the
measurement reading cannot be available. Therefore, for the measurement use, \(\sigma\) refers to this
absolute zero point, which is always covert, and \(\delta\) is a numerical measurement phrase, which is
always overtly expressed.

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{(9)} & \quad [\text{高 gâo}]_{(d, (d, \sigma))} \overset{\text{def}}{=} \lambda \sigma. \lambda \delta. \lambda x. \text{HEIGHT}(x) - \sigma = \delta \\
\sigma & \text{: the standard in a comparison; } \delta \text{: the difference in a comparison; } \text{HEIGHT: a measure} \\
& \text{function that takes } x \text{ as input and returns the measurement of } x \text{ on the scale of height.}
\end{align*} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(\sigma) (standard)</th>
<th>(\delta) (difference)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>a typical or relevant average (often overt) (e.g., (hên))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>a salient standard (e.g., (bì)-phrase) (covert or overt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement</td>
<td>the absolute zero point of the scale (always covert)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{(10)} & \quad \text{Zhâng-Sân gâo de } \text{hên}
\quad \text{Zhâng Sân tall(-er) PARTICLE very}
\quad \text{‘Zhâng Sân is very tall.’} \quad \sim \text{ positive}
\end{align*} \]

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{(11)} & \quad \text{Zhâng-Sân gâo } \text{hên duô}
\quad \text{Zhâng Sân tall(-er) very much/more}
\quad \text{‘Zhâng Sân is much taller.’} \quad \sim \text{ comparative}
\end{align*} \]

\[ \text{Presumably, the semantics of } \text{hên} \text{ refers to an unspecified high value serving as the standard on a relevant scale. Thus, for (3b), the use of } \text{hên} \text{ (as the standard on the scale associated with gradable adjective gâo) naturally gives rise to the positive reading. Then in (10), I propose that there is a silent gâo following } \text{hên}, \text{ so that overall, } \text{gâo de hên (gâo) is interpreted roughly as tall to the extent of ‘very tall’, i.e., a positive reading.} \]

\[ 2 \]
Evidently, my analysis explains how comparisons are encoded in Mandarin Chinese: comparisons are encoded by gradable adjectives themselves, and thus the comparative use is not special in involving comparisons and does not need a silent marker.

**The use of gèng** It is worth noting that the use of some morphemes like gèng (‘furthermore’) or hái-yào (‘still’) often co-occurs with the comparative reading. For example, without gèng, (3a) is ambiguous between a comparative and a positive reading, while with the use of gèng, (13) is unambiguously comparative. This contrast gives the impression that gèng seems a marker of comparison. However, as illustrated in (14), in unambiguous comparative sentences, the use of gèng is quite optional. As pointed out by Liu (2010a), gèng actually brings a presuppositional requirement. For (14), without the use of gèng, there is no presupposition, while with the use of gèng, the sentence presupposes the existence of another comparison: i.e., Lì Sì, whose height serves as the standard in the asserted comparison, is already tall (i.e., taller than the typical or relevant average).

Thus, gèng is not a marker of comparison (see (15) and (16) for lexical entries of gèng and bǐ): it is a modifier for gradable adjectives that makes the asserted comparison a second comparison. In other words, gèng is the marker of the existence of a presupposed comparison. Under the current analysis, since all uses of gradable adjectives encode a comparison, there is no need to mark the asserted comparison.

Then since gèng marks the existence of a presupposed comparison, gèng actually also indicates the discourse salience of σ, i.e., the standard used in the asserted comparison. Then since this standard needs to be a salient discourse referent, it can be neither the absolute zero point nor a typical average, ruling out the measurement or the positive interpretation for the asserted comparison. Therefore, due to the use of gèng, which indicates the discourse salience of the standard in the asserted comparison, (13) has an unambiguous comparative reading.

(13) 张三 更 高
Zhāng Sān gèng gāo
‘Zhāng Sān is (even) taller.’

(14) 张三 比 李四 (更) 高 (五 厘米)
Zhāng Sān bǐ Lì Sì (gèng) gāo (wǔ lí-mǐ)
‘Zhāng Sān is (5 cm) taller than Lì Sì.’

With gèng: the sentence presupposes that Lì Sì is tall;
Without gèng: there is no presupposition.

(15) \[ \left[ \text{更} \text{ gèng} \right] (d, (d,e,t)), (d, (d,e,t)) \equiv \lambda G_{(d,(d,e,t))} \cdot \lambda x, \cdot \lambda \delta \cdot \lambda \sigma, \cdot \lambda \sigma', \cdot \sigma - \sigma' = \delta' \cdot G' \cdot \text{ scale}(x) - \sigma = \delta \]

Assertion: the measurement of x exceeds the standard σ by a difference value δ.

Presupposition (the underlined part): the standard σ exceeds another standard σ’ (Most likely, σ’ does not have discourse salience, yielding a positive reading for this presupposed comparison).

(16) \[ \left[ \text{比} \text{ bǐ} \right] (d, (d,e,t)), (e, d) \equiv \lambda G_{(d,(d,e,t))}, \lambda x, \cdot G' \cdot \text{ scale}(x) \]
Distinguishing the three uses of gradable adjectives  

From (9), it is clear that the three uses of gradable adjectives are distinct from one another only in terms of the standard $\sigma$ and the difference $\delta$ involved in comparisons. I.e., there is no need to morphologically make a difference between the so-called comparative vs. positive (or non-comparative) forms for gradable adjectives. Thus, the generalization in Table (2) is immediately validated.

(9) also makes it clear that a three-way ambiguous sentence is never possible.

According to (9), since a numerical measurement phrase $\delta$ is never compatible with the positive use, then whenever the use of a gradable adjective is accompanied by a numerical difference, the only possible readings are the measurement and the comparative readings (see (6a)). Similarly, since the measurement use always requires the presence of an overt numerical measurement phrase as $\delta$, then as far as there is no numerical measurement phrase, the only possible readings are the positive and the comparative readings (see (3a)).

In addition to the presence/absence of numerical differences, I further propose that the actual interpretation of distinctive uses makes use of two other kinds of clues.

The first is a competition mechanism that can be characterized within the Rational Speech Act framework (Frank & Goodman 2012). Within this framework, speakers and listeners reason about each other’s reasoning about the literal as well as likely interpretations. As illustrated in (17), with the use of ہئن, (3b) has an unambiguous positive reading. If interlocutors are rational and use pragmatic reasoning, then, between the ambiguous sentence (3a) and the unambiguous positive-reading sentence (3b), they should choose (3b) to convey the positive reading. Based on this, if this unambiguous sentence (3b) is not chosen, but the ambiguous sentence (3a) is used, most likely, it is the comparative reading that interlocutors intend to convey. Thus, though the literal meaning of (3a) is ambiguous, its likely interpretation is comparative.

Similarly, for (6a) and (6b) (see 18), since the addition of a ہئ-phrase and/or an aspectual marker ۓ can disambiguate and lead to an unambiguous comparative reading, then the non-use of these elements makes the non-comparative reading more likely. In other words, though the literal meaning of (6a) is ambiguous, its likely interpretation is a measurement use.

(17)  
a. Without ہئن: $[3a] = [Zhāng Sān is tall/taller] \sim \text{ambiguous} \sim \text{non-positive}$  
b. With ہئن: $[(3b)] = [Zhāng Sān is tall] \sim \text{positive}$

(18)  
a. Without a ہئ-phrase: $[(6a)] = [\cdots long/longer] \sim \text{ambiguous} \sim \text{non-comparative}$  
b. With a ہئ-phrase: $[(6b)] = [\cdots longer than \cdots] \sim \text{comparative}$

The second clue is the discourse salience of the standard $\sigma$ for the comparative use. Different from the positive and the measurement use, the comparative use crucially requires that its standard be a salient discourse referent. Thus, when there is no ہئ-construction to explicitly introduce a salient standard, context needs to help with the accommodation of a salient standard. Obviously, among the above-mentioned examples, for (5), a salient standard is available, and thus (5) has a comparative reading, while for (4), there is no salient standard, and thus these sentences have no comparative reading, but only a positive reading.

If context supplies a salient standard for the yes/no question in (4b), as shown in (19), then a comparative reading is readily available. (19) and (4b) again suggest that the distinction between a positive and a comparative reading cannot be due to syntactic factors.
(19)  A: 张三不是很高
A: Zhāng-Sān bù shì hěn gāo
A: Zhāng-Sān neg copula very tall(-er)

B: 那跟李四相比，张三高不高？
B: nà gēn Lì-Sì xiāng-bì Zhāng-Sān gāo bù gāo
B: then with Lì-Sì compare Zhāng-Sān tall(-er) neg tall(-er)

‘A: Zhāng Sān is not tall. B: Then compared with Lì Sì, is he taller?’ ~ comparative

Intriguingly, for (4a), even if we use it to construct an example similar to (19), the comparative reading is still unavailable. (20) is unacceptable: if gāo is interpreted as tall, the sentence sounds contradictory, but gāo here can by no means be interpreted as taller. Presumably, to license the meaning that Zhāng Sān is taller than the other kids, the difference set ‘all kids minus Zhāng Sān’ needs to be a salient discourse referent, but it fails to be so.

(20) # 这些孩子都很矮其中就张三高
zhè-xiē hái-zi dōu hěn ěi qí-zhōng jiù Zhāng-Sān gāo
these kids all very short(-er) among/inside only Zhāng-Sān tall(-er)
Unavailable: ‘These kids are all short. Among them, only Zhāng Sān is taller.’

Gradable adjectives used at prenominal position As shown in (21) and (22), the comparative reading is totally unavailable in these cases. To convey the meaning that she wrote a longer letter, additional elements like gèng or bǐ- phrases are necessary (see (23)).

It is worth noting that in (21) and (22), given their context, there are indeed global discourse-salient items that can serve as the standard for comparison. Thus, it remains unclear why the comparative reading is totally impossible in these cases. One potential reason is that in these examples, the global discourse-salient items might be inaccessible to the prenominal gradable adjectives, failing to satisfy the requirement of the comparative use. A more detailed investigation for this issue is left for future research.

(21) (之前那封信很短)
zhī-qián nà fēng xìn hěn duǎn
previously that classifier letter very short

她又写了一封长的信
tā yòu xiě-le yī fēng cháng de xìn
3.sg.f. again write-aspect one classifier long(-er) particle letter

‘(The previous letter was short). She then wrote a long one.’ ~ positive

(22) (之前那封信只有三页)
zhī-qián nà fēng xìn zhǐ yǒu sān yè
previously that classifier letter only have three page

她又写了一封长五页的信
tā yòu xiě-le yī fēng cháng wǔ yè de xìn
3.sg.f. again write-aspect one classifier long(-er) five page particle letter

‘(The previous letter has only 3 pages). She then wrote a 5-page-long letter.’ ~ measurement
4. Discussion

According to my proposal, the meaning of comparison is inherent to the semantics of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese. Thus there is no need to mark the comparison involved in the comparative use. This analysis is highly consistent with Oda (2005)’s account for the semantics of gradable adjectives in Japanese. This raises a new question for the generalization shown in Table (2): why is comparison still marked in languages like English and French? If the notion of comparison underlies all the uses of gradable adjectives cross-linguistically, then in principle, (asserted) comparison never needs to be marked.

At least for English, it seems likely that the fundamental semantic contribution of comparative morpheme -er/more is simply additive (see also Greenberg 2010, Thomas 2010, Zhang & Ling 2020). The most natural interpretation of (24) is that Mary continued drinking after blacking out, i.e., the amount she drank at a later time does not necessarily exceed the amount she drank previously. In this sense, -er/more actually behaves like additive particles (e.g., another, also) and has a discourse-level contribution. As illustrated in (25), -er/more brings a presuppositional requirement: compared to (25a), (25b) presupposes the existence of a salient degree of amount in the discourse, serving as the base for the asserted amount, so that the asserted amount is considered an increase on this presupposed base. By behaving like an additive particle, most likely, -er/more marks the discourse salience of the item serving as the standard in a comparison, and it does not mark comparison per se.

(24) Mary drank till she blacked out. Then she drank more.
(25) a. Mary drank some beer. \(\sim\) existential assertion  
b. Mary drank more beer. \(\sim\) presupposition + existential assertion

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper analyzes the three fundamental uses of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese: the positive use, the comparative use, and the measurement use. I have argued that since the notion of comparison underlies all these three uses, the meaning of comparison does not need to be marked, which explains why there is no need to morphologically make a distinction between comparative and non-comparative forms. I analyze the semantics of gradable adjectives as a relation among (i) the measurement of an individual, (ii) a standard value for comparison, and (iii) the difference between the above two. Thus, the distinction among the three uses can be naturally attributed to their distinctive standard and difference.

Without a specification of standard or difference, the use of gradable adjectives in Mandarin Chinese is inherently ambiguous. However, adding elements like hěn or bǐ-phrases can...
help to disambiguate, and for pragmatic interlocutors, the non-use of these disambiguating elements also helps them to get the more likely interpretation in literally ambiguous cases.

Can the currently proposed analysis lead to a new generalization for cross-linguistic data? In the discussion, I have suggested that comparative morpheme -er in English probably does not mark comparison, but the discourse salience of the standard in comparison. How about the seeming markers of comparison in other languages? These issues are left for future research.

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