

Measure phrases and negative degrees in Japanese, English and Polish

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This paper argues for the existence of non-neutral, committed measure expressions in Japanese, in which negative-degree property words can occur with measure phrases (MP). One of the common modification conditions of MPs is that the modified adjective (or other property word) must be of positive degree. For example:

- (1) a. The tree has a height of 2 meters.
b. *The tree has a lowness of 2 meters.

According to the semantics of degrees proposed by Kennedy (2001), adjectives denote functions from objects to degrees. Any object x can have two projections, a positive and a negative one, on a scale S that are join complementary intervals, covering the whole range of the property, the degree of which is mapped onto scale S . Positive degrees are represented as intervals ranging from the lower end of a scale to some point, and the negative degrees as intervals ranging from some point to the upper end of the scale (in particular: infinity). Kennedy, referring to von Stechow (1984), argues that ‘functions denoted by MPs are defined only for degrees of particular scales (determined by the head of the MP) and for degrees of particular sorts - closed intervals on the scale.’ The above theory accounts for the oddness of examples like (1b), in the following way: since the negative degrees are represented by open, infinite intervals, they cannot be ascribed real, definite numbers.

This study demonstrates distributional facts from Japanese that are difficult to account for within the above framework. This is especially the case with constructions like (2):

- (2) Empitu wa aru ga san senti no mizikasa da kara kakenai.
pencil TOP be but three cm GEN shortness COP because cannot.write
‘I do have a pencil, but since it’s as short as three centimeters I cannot write.’
lit. ‘the pencil has a shortness of three centimeters’

Genitive phrases of this kind are a very common type of Japanese degree expressions. In the cases where objects denoted by the NP are short, low or narrow (from the viewpoint of the standard applicable to the given class) the extent of their shortness, lowness or narrowness can be specified by means of numerical values and units of measurement (i.e. MPs). In addition, two other related types of structures will be discussed: phrases employing complementizer *toiu* and measure expressions where the MP is directly adjacent to the noun denoting the given property.

This puzzle can be partially resolved by noting that: (i) negative-degree de-adjectival nouns are generally more common in Japanese degree expressions (questions about degrees, ratios, proportions, rankings) than in other languages; (ii) if we adopt a wide definition of measure expressions, saying that they consist of MPs and property words, without being confined to any particular syntax, then such measure expressions can clearly be licensed by negative-

degree items even in English. For example: 'The tree is as low as 2 meters'. (Polish seems to be different in this respect, though).

The argument will be presented against the background of the material of Polish and English as well as results of questionnaire surveys examining the way native speakers of Japanese process/encode the above types of structures.

References

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