Adjective Classifiers and Comparison Class

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In many numeral classifier languages of South China, size/shape adjectives occur with a classifier (in addition to a numeral classifier), exemplified in (1) for Shantou Teochew (Southern Min). Liu (2010) has proposed a dimension-denoting analysis of adjective classifiers (A.CL) for Taiwanese Southern Min (TSM). We propose S.Teochew A.CL also specify the comparison class of the adjective, and present a syntactic analysis. The findings offer evidence for variation in the ways in which standards of comparison can be integrated into the structure of degree expressions.

1) a. dua*(-**lia?**/-**go**) gai niaots'u. b.sio-**tsia** gai ts'io. c. sio-**ku** gai ts'io.
big-A.CL/A.CL^{DEFAULT} N.MOD mouse small-A.CL N.MOD elephant small-A.CL N.MOD elephant
'big mouse' (animal) 'small elephant' (animal) 'small elephant' (toy statue)

2) He's tall [for a basketball player]

Background In S.Teochew A.CL is obligatory with ten adjectives, in all structural contexts: *dua/soi* 'big/ small', *dun/do* 'long/short', *gui/oi* 'tall/short', and basic shapes: *saga/bang/yi/toyi* 'triangular/ square/round/oval'. A.CL is ungrammatical with all other adjectives (e.g., *heavy*(*-A.CL)). Of S.Teochew's approx. 200 classifiers, A.CL are from the (largest) subclass that have dimensional lexical meaning, and agree with the noun's class; in addition, A.CL may be the default classifier (1a).

Proposal A.CL in S.Teochew specify comparison class (CC), overtly providing a standard of comparison. In (1a), with A.CL *lia?*, means 'a big mouse, where bigness is relative to a set specified by *lia?'* (i.e., small 3D objects). (1a) with (default classifier) *go* means 'a big mouse, where bigness is relative to mice' (i.e., the standard is fixed by the noun). We argue that A.CL is interpreted as supplying a CC, comparable to English *for* in (2).

Support A CC analysis contrasts with Liu's (2010) analysis of A.CL in TSM as denoting dimension (volume, height). The dimension analysis is based on A.CL having dimension lexical semantics, and (by design) excludes default classifiers as potential A.CL (Liu 2010). However, default classifiers are possible A.CL in S.Teochew (1a), in contrast to TSM. Further evidence includes: (I) Changing A.CL in S.Teochew affects the standard of comparison, not simply dimension: an elephant is small in (1b) relative to other elephants/3D objects vs. in (1c) small is relative to toys (also 3D objects). (II) The only context A.CL does not occur in S.Teochew is phrasal comparatives, where the N specifying the standard is of a different class than the N being compared (*elephants are bigger(*-A.CL) than mice*). (III) Negation affects the standard, not just dimension: the elephant in (1b) is small only relative to a big object noun class, so denial is infelicitous (#*…but the elephant is not small-A.CL*). (IV) S.Teochew A.CL adjectives lack absolute readings, and are incompatible with precise measures (**2m tall-A.CL*), mirroring English *for* (**He's 7ft tall for a basketball player*).

Analysis/variation Despite parallels, A.CL differ from better studied overt CCs such as *for*. We argue variation is (morpho)syntactic. English *for*- phrases are analyzed as adjuncts (modifiers of Adj) or arguments of its extended functional structure (e.g.) Deg/POS (Kennedy 2007, Bale 2011, Solt 2011, and refs there). In contrast, we argue that A.CL adjectives directly select for the classifier (CC). In syntax, the adjective and A.CL form a complex head (A.CL is, roughly speaking, directly affixed to the adjective). Evidence comes from tone sandhi, reduplication patterns, and distribution in resultative compounds. We argue a syntactic explanation accounts for the requirement for an (overt) A.CL CC across attributive, predicative, and comparative contexts; while (overt) *for*- is restricted to positive predicative and indirect comparative structures. (We also observe a second contrast: *for* CCs presuppose the subject is a member of the set given by the *for* phrase, while the inclusion relation between N and the A.CL class is conventionally implicated. We argue this follows from properties

of sortal classifiers more broadly, if the domain restricting aspects of non-measure numeral classifier noun classification are also a matter of conventional implicature (McCready 2012, Nomoto 2013).)

References

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