Mandarin transitive comparatives and the grammar of measurement

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Abstract Mandarin Chinese has two strategies for forming comparatives of superiority: one in which the standard of comparison is introduced by the morpheme bi, and one that resembles a transitive verb construction, in which the standard of comparison directly follows a gradable adjective. The ‘transitive comparative’ exhibits two special restrictions: the predicate must be one that accepts differential measure phrases, and the measure phrase must be overt. We argue that these facts support an analysis of the syntax of the adjectival projection in which gradable adjectives do not project degree arguments, as typically assumed, but do so only in combination with a covert morpheme μ. Building on the proposal that argument DPs in Mandarin require Case, we hypothesize that there are (at least) two case assigners for standards of comparison in Mandarin: the overt morpheme bi and the covert morpheme μ found in transitive comparatives.

Keywords Mandarin Chinese · Comparatives · Measure phrases · Case
1 Introduction

The canonical comparative construction in Mandarin Chinese involves the morpheme *bi*, which is followed by a term that provides a standard of comparison, then by a gradable predicate, and finally by an optional differential expression (for recent theoretical literature on the *bi*-comparative, see especially Liu (1996); Xiang (2005); Erlewine (2007); Lin (2009)):

(1) a. Zhangsan bi Lisi gao (yi dian).
   Zhangsan SM Lisi tall (one dot)
   ‘Zhangsan is (a little) taller than Lisi.’

b. Zhangsan bi Lisi piaoliang (yi dian).
   Zhangsan SM Lisi pretty one dot
   ‘Zhangsan is (a little) prettier than Lisi.’

It is also possible to express certain kinds of comparisons using a structure which we will refer to as the TRANSITIVE COMPARATIVE, borrowing this term from Erlewine (2007), in which *bi* is absent, and the gradable predicate precedes the standard:

(2) a. Zhangsan gao Lisi yi dian / san gongfen.
   Zhangsan tall Lisi one dot / three centimeters
   ‘Zhangsan is a bit/three centimeters taller than Lisi.’

b. Zhangsan zhong Lisi yi dian / san gongjin.
   Zhangsan heavy Lisi one dot / three kilograms
   ‘Zhangsan is a bit/three kilograms heavier than Lisi.’

This structure is not freely available, however, as shown by (3a, b), which are superficially parallel to (2a, b) but are ungrammatical.

(3) a. *Zhangsan piaoliang Lisi yi dian.
   Zhangsan pretty Lisi one dot
   Intended: ‘Zhangsan is a bit prettier than Lisi.’

b. *Zhangsan gaoxing Lisi yi dian.
   Zhangsan happy Lisi one dot
   Intended: ‘Zhangsan is a bit happier than Lisi.’

Xiang (2005) demonstrates that well-formed transitive comparatives must satisfy two conditions. The first condition is that the structure must contain an overt

1 The same construction is called the “obligatory measuring comparative” by Mok (1998); the “absent marking construction” by Ansaldo (1999), who explores the construction in Sinitic languages in general; the “bare comparative” by Xiang (2005); and the “X A (Y) D comparative” by Liu (2007).