Gradability is an essential concept in the studies of adjectives, which classifies adjectives into two major classes, non-gradable adjectives, like *British*, etc. and gradable adjectives, like *tall*, *long*, etc. To grasp this distinction and particularly to account for the core characteristic of gradable adjectives, linguists conduct a great many investigations around DEGREE. Among various aspects for looking into the problem, this paper adopts the major approaches in the field of formal semantics as well as in generative grammar. The paper attempts to integrate formal semantics and generative syntax to reveal the core meaning of gradable adjectives and the syntactic constructions where they appear. The explanation for the noticeable differences between Mandarin comparisons and English comparisons will also be given.

Compositionality is the most important principle in formal semantics. Under the guidance of the Compositionality Principle, formal semantics focuses on determining the semantic type of constituents and figuring out the means of how they combine with each other, which is referred to as the type-driven computation (蒋严 潘海华). In formal semantics, questions concerning generalised quantifiers and - conversion are of prominent importance and they are also largely encountered in discussions of gradable adjectives. As to degree semantics, degree is encoded in the meaning of gradable adjectives an account commonly admitted by scholars, which is initially proposed by Cresswell (1976), giving rise to a third primitive semantic type besides the two primitive semantic types and in classical semantics Degree semanticists also identify three major parts of gradable adjectives: (a) a measure function , mapping the target onto the abstract dimension for measurement characteristic of the gradable adjective (Bartsch & Vennemann, 1973); (b) the total ordering relation , which makes the set of scales corresponding to the abstract dimension ordered in pairs of a same direction; (c) the degree variable, indicating the value of . A gradable adjective of predictive use is analysed as a two-place predicate with the individual and the degree as its arguments.

The purpose of generative grammar is using definite and concise rules to generate indefinite and complex structures via formal expressions. Among a great many technical details of generative grammar, the development of the functional phrase (FP) can be taken as reference to account for the structure of degree constructions in particular. Besides the derivation of Logical Form (LF) is a cross-cutting question between syntax and semantics, which is crucial for discussions of the scope ambiguity of generalised quantifiers, almost unavoidable in debates around degree constructions.

Since Cresswell, the semantic type of gradable adjectives is largely debated, among which three major perspectives are listed here: (a) (von Stechow, 1984), which is the so-called standard analysis; (b) (Kennedy, 1997), which is referred to as the simplified analysis; (c) (Rett, 2008), which is referred to as the order-changed analysis.

Another doubtful topic in the field of degree constructions is the status of “more/er” degree morpheme. The major discrepancy exists in whether to regard the degree morpheme as a generalised quantifier (von Stechow, 1984; Heim, 1985, 2000; Bhatt&Pancheva, 2004) or to regard the degree morpheme as a functional morpheme (Bierwisch, 1989; Corver, 1990, 1993, 1997; Kennedy, 1997; Grano&Kennedy, 2012). The former including the so-called standard analysis of von Stechow, advocates that the degree morpheme lands at an adjunct position within the adjective phrase (AP), undergoing quantifier raising (QR), while the latter assumes that the degree morpheme occupies the head of the degree phrase (DegP) located above the gradable adjective.

/Reference

(蒋严 潘海华)

Cresswell (1976)

Bartsch & Vennemann, 1973

(von Stechow, 1984)

(Kennedy, 1997)

(Rett, 2008)

von stechow, 1984; Heim, 1985, 2000; Bhatt&Pancheva, 2004

Bierwisch, 1989; Corver, 1990, 1993, 1997; Kennedy, 1997; Grano&Kennedy, 2012