Ways of Expressing the Standard for Relative Gradable Adjectives

According to Zhu (1956, 1982), predicative use of Chinese adjectives is possible only in (i) contrastive contexts or (ii) contexts where they appear in the complex form such as a reduplicated (e.g., AABB-de) or the [degree modifier+Adjective] form. However, in English, occurrence of predicative adjectives is not subject to such a condition. This is shown by the contrast (1a-c) between (2).

(1) a. Zhe-ke pingguo hong, na-ke huang.
   This-CL apple red that-CL yellow
   ‘This apple is red, but that one is yellow.’
b. Zhe-ke pingguo hong-hong-de/hen hong.
   This-CL apple red-red-DÉ very red
   ‘This apple is very red.’
c. *Zhe-ke pingguo hong.
   This-CL apple red

(2) This apple is (very) red.

The purpose of this paper is argue that the contrast between (1a-c) and (2) can be reduced to the typological difference between Chinese and English in the way of providing the context-sensitive standard for relative gradable adjectives. As Zhu (1956, 1982) argues, when occurring in a contrastive environment, a Chinese adjective, as in (1a), simply refers to a permanent state of the subject NP (i.e., the redness of this apple) with which contrasts with the yellowness of that apple. However, when occurring as a complex adjective, the predicative adjective, as in (1b), refers to a temporary state the subject NP. Likewise, in English a predicative adjective refers to a temporary state of the subject NP, too (cf. Bolinger (1967)). Assuming Kennedy and McNally’s (2002, 2004) study on adjectives, we suggest temporariness shown by predicative adjectives can be understood as the contextually-fixed value of standard of comparison for a relative standard adjective like gui ‘expensive’. For example, the domain restriction C of the template in (3c) determines the standard of comparison in (3a-b) by defining an appropriately property of degree (e.g., the property of being significantly greater than some norm for some comparison class, or the property of being greater than average for some comparison class).

(3) a. The international space station is (very) expensive.
   b. This apple is (very) expensive.
   c. \[[\text{ap, expensive}] = \lambda x. \exists d [C(d) \land \text{expensive}(x) \geq d] \]

Assuming that the value of C in (3c) is fixed contextually, like other implicit quantifier domain restrictions, the standard of comparison is allowed to vary across different contexts of use. Temporariness shown by predicative adjectives can naturally be understood as a contextually-fixed standard that is too fleeting to characterize. We further assume that in a language with grammatical tense marker like English, the value of C is provided by the grammatical tense because tense provides necessary information for the spatio-temporal world where comparison is made. Hence, languages without grammatical tense need some other mechanism(s) which can provide for relative gradable adjectives necessary information for the context-sensitive standard to make comparison possible. We suggest that Chinese adopts the following two ways to fulfill this requirement: (A) the degree modifier and (B) the reduplicated form of adjectives. First, according to Kennedy and McNally (2002, 2004), a degree modifier, like very, has a template like (4a), in which R is property of degrees whose value is used to distinguish different degree modifiers, and for very the value of relative standard (i.e., \(d\)) is lexically implied, as shown by (4b).

(4) a. \[[\text{Deg}] = \lambda G \lambda x. \exists d[R(d) \land G(d)(x)]\]
   b. \[[\text{very}] = \lambda G. \lambda x. \exists d[\text{high}(d) \land G(d)(x)]\]

Second, the relative standard of comparison for a complex gradable adjective like honghong-de is the bare adjective hong ‘red’, which is a relative gradable adjective.
Ways of Expressing the Standard for Relative Gradable Adjectives

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According to Zhu (1956, 1982), predicative use of Chinese adjectives is possible only in (i) contrastive contexts or (ii) contexts where they appear in the complex form such as a reduplicated (e.g., ABB-de) or the [degree modifier+Adjective] form. However, in English, occurrence of predicative adjectives is not subject to such a condition. This is shown by the contrast (1a-c) between (2).

(2) a. Zhe-ke pingguo hong, na-ke huang.
   This-CL apple red that-CL yellow
   ‘This apple is red, but that one is yellow.’

   b. Zhe-ke pingguo hong-hong-de/hen hong.
   This-CL apple red-red-DE very red
   ‘This apple is very red.’

   c. *Zhe-ke pingguo hong.
   This-CL apple red

(2) This apple is (very) red.

The purpose of this paper is argue that the contrast between (1a-c) and (2) can be reduced to the typological difference between Chinese and English in the way of providing the context-sensitive standard for relative gradable adjectives. As Zhu (1956, 1982) argues, when occurring in a contrastive environment, a Chinese adjective, as in (1a), simply refers to a permanent state of the subject NP (i.e., the redness of this apple) with which contrasts with the yellowness of that apple. However, when occurring as a complex adjective, the predicative adjective, as in (1b), refers to a temporary state the subject NP. Likewise, in English a predicative adjective refers to a temporary state of the subject NP, too (cf. Bolinger (1967)). Assuming Kennedy and McNally’s (2002, 2004) study on adjectives, we suggest temporariness shown by predicative adjectives can be understood as the contextually-fixed value of standard of comparison for a relative standard adjective like gui ‘expensive’. For example, the domain restriction C of the template in (3c) determines the standard of comparison in (3a-b) by defining an appropriately property of degree (e.g., the property of being significantly greater than some norm for some comparison class, or the property of being greater than average for some comparison class).

(3) a. The international space station is (very) expensive.
   b. This apple is (very) expensive.
   c. [[\lambda x . D ( x ) \ast \lambda G x . \exists d \left[ C ( d ) \wedge \text{expensive}(x) \geq d \right]]

Assuming that the value of C in (3c) is fixed contextually, like other implicit quantifier domain restrictions, the standard of comparison is allowed to vary across different contexts of use. Temporariness shown by predicative adjectives can naturally be understood as a contextually-fixed standard that is too fleeting to characterize. We further assume that in a language with grammatical tense marker like English, the value of C is provided by the grammatical tense because tense provides necessary information for the spatio-temporal world where comparison is made. Hence, languages without grammatical tense need some other mechanism(s) which can provide for relative gradable adjectives necessary information for the context-sensitive standard to make comparison possible. We suggest that Chinese adopts the following two ways to fulfill this requirement: (A) the degree modifier and (B) the reduplicated form of adjectives. First, according to Kennedy and McNally (2002, 2004), a degree modifier, like very, has a template like (4a), in which R is property of degrees whose value is used to distinguish different degree modifiers, and for very the value of relative standard (i.e., d) is lexically implied, as shown by (4b).

(4) a. [[\lambda G x . \exists d [ R ( d ) \wedge G ( d ) ( x ) ]]
   b. [[\lambda G , \lambda x . \exists d [ \text{high}(d) \wedge G ( d ) ( x ) ]]

Second, the relative standard of comparison for a complex gradable adjective like honghong-de is the bare adjective hong ‘red’, which is a relative gradable adjective.