Polar Opposition in Japanese Measure Phrases

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The negative-degree members of polar antonymic pairs, such as short, narrow, or low exhibit several constraints attributed to their semantic markedness (e.g. Bierwisch 1989). For example, they do not neutralize in questions or nominalizations and, this is the main focus of this study, they cannot take numerals with units of measurement in the measure phrases (MP). For example:

(1) a. This stick is 5 centimeters long/??short.
   b. The stick has a length of 5 centimeters / *a shortness of 5 centimeters.

In the semantics proposed by Kennedy (2001) positive and negative degrees are represented as two complementary intervals on the scale, where the former range from the bottom of the scale to some point, and the latter from some point to the infinity. Degrees occurring in MPs must be closed intervals on the scale, since they are specified by means of numerical values, represented by real numbers. The negative degrees do not satisfy this condition because of their infinity, which renders the second halves of examples (1a) and (1b) odd. In other words, the unit of measurement (here: centimeter) imposes a presupposition that its degree argument must be of a positive degree (in the polarity, not gradation sense) of a given property. This line of argument, based on data from English and other, mainly Germanic, languages is then tacitly assumed in the semantic literature to apply to the negative-degree property words in general.

This study demonstrates that the above constraint does not hold for a number of facts of Japanese where not only positive, but also negative de-adjectival nouns can occur in measure phrases, as in the following examples:

(2) a. emipitu wa aru ga 3 senti no mizikasa da
   pencil TOP be but 3 centimeter GEN shortness COP
   ‘I (do) have a pencil, but it is as short as three centimeters’ (*it has a shortness of three centimeters)
   b. tyoo no zyuumyoo wa 2-3 shuukan toiu mizikasa da
   butterfly GEN life span TOP 2-3 weeks called shortness COP
   ‘The life span of a butterfly is as short as 2-3 weeks’ (*it has a shortness of 2-3 weeks)
   c. saisin no keita denwa wa karusa 20 gunamu da
   the newest GEN portable phone TOP lightness 20 gram COP
   ‘The newest cell phone is as light as 20 grams.’ (*it has a lightness of 20 grams)

The fact that sentences like (2a) and (2b) can be commonly found in Japanese shows that the above restriction is (a) language specific, and (b) strongly related to the syntactic environment: negative-degree items are perfectly natural in the genitive (2a) and complementizer phrases like (2b) (which are emphatic variants of 2a, identical in semantic terms), but in the case of ‘canonical’ MPs like (2c), negative-degree words are hardly acceptable and are noted here only because of the wide distribution of such phrases in Japanese commercial messages. Moreover, different possible types of predication in the measure phrases are of importance as well. That is to say, regardless of the polarity of degree, MPs in Japanese can only be realized by means of de-adjectival (or other) nouns, but not adjectives, since they cannot be modified by MPs in their non-comparative degrees.

The above argument is presented against the background of other instances from Japanese (degree questions, ratios, proportions, rankings) and results of questionnaire surveys, supporting the claim that negative-degree de-adjectival nouns are generally more common in Japanese than in other languages (due to the virtually unlimited productivity of the nominalizing suffix -sa ‘-ness’).

References