Overt positive degree morphology in Tibetic

Patrick Muñoz
University of Chicago
pjmunoz@uchicago.edu

Recent literature on degree morphology and gradable adjectives has sometimes claimed (e.g. Bobaljik 2012: 32, fn. 5; Grano & Davis 2018: 133) that there is no well-described language in which a degree morpheme attending gradable adjectives in the positive form is uncontroversially and overtly realized. If this is true, then it is a problem for semantic theories of gradable adjectives which, following Cresswell (1976), posit a positive-form degree morpheme (‘POS’) in this position, since there is no descriptive, theory-independent reason to believe in the existence of such a morpheme.

The purpose of this talk is to fill a descriptive lacuna in the theoretical literature: certain varieties of Tibetic, including Ü-Tsang / ‘Standard’ Tibetan (UT), from which this talk takes its examples, but also Literary Tibetan (Goldstein et al. 1991: 249ff.) and Sherpa (Kelly 2004: 235–236), do overtly realize a distinct morpheme with positive-form gradable adjectives. The marking is robust, regular, and clear, making the case for such a morpheme in Tibetic far less controversial than previous similar claims made for Navajo (Bogal-Albritton 2008: 30), Mandarin (Grano 2012), and Arabic (Grano & Davis 2018).

UT has a distinct class of adjectives, which appear with obligatory degree morphology to the right of the stem, both in attributive and predicative position. This includes a morpheme, most often realized as po, which appears in the positive form. As illustrated with the stem tsha ‘hot’:

(1) tsha po (‘hot’) / tsha ba (‘hotter’) / tsha shos (‘hottest’)

This questions the generalization in Grano & Davis (2018: 133, ex. 8), according to which comparative and positive forms can’t be overtly (i) equally complex and (ii) non-identical. The marker po is obligatory in the positive, it is in contrastive distribution with a wide variety of other degree markers, and it cannot stack with the others (e.g. *tsha po ba). It further has its own morphophonological life, with the allomorph depending on the adjectival stem, and has a cross-categorical degree-related function, appearing also on gradable quantifiers (e.g. mang po ‘much/many’).