

Degree constructions and directed scale segments in Eastern Oromo

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This paper proposes a formal semantic analysis of degree constructions in Eastern Oromo (Cushitic; Ethiopia), including equatives, degree questions, approximations, comparatives, and differentials. The analysis uses directed scale segments (Schwarzschild & Wilkinson 2002, Schwarzschild 2012, Schwarzschild 2013) as many of the constructions involve a word *hanga* meaning ‘extent’ or ‘until’ and use inchoative morphology, which can be captured using the notion of a rising scale segment with distinct start and end points.

Equatives sentences in Oromo have the structure: subject - *hanga* - standard phrase - predicate, as in (1). Their predicate must be realized as an inchoative verb, and *hanga* in (1) seems to refer to ‘amount’ or ‘extent’ so that the sentence literally means ‘Kaz gets tall to the extent of Tamam’.

- (1) Kaz hanga Tamam ni dheerata.
Kaz HANGA Tamam FOC gets.tall
‘Kaz is as tall as Tamam.’

hanga also appears in degree questions, as in (2). As with equatives, *hanga* + inchoative morphology on the verb give the sentence a meaning something like ‘Tamam gets tall to which extent?’.

- (2) Tamam hanga-m dheerata.
Tamam HANGA-which gets.tall
‘How tall is Tamam?’

In approximations, *hanga* + the inchoative predicate indicate ‘less than or equal to’, as (3) would be used when Tamam is 6’ tall or slightly shorter, but unlikely to be used if he were slightly taller.

- (3) Tamam hanga fiti jaha-a ni dheerata.
Tamam HANGA feet six-GEN FOC gets.tall
‘Tamam is about (lit. up to) six feet tall.’

Differentials as in (5) combine the comparative structure (subject - standard phrase - standard marker *irra* - predicate) as in (4) with *hanga* and the inchoative verb form.

- (4) Tamam Kazirra dheeraa dha.
Tamam Kaz-IRRA tall is
‘Tamam is taller than Kaz.’
- (5) Abdulhamid inch lama hangaan ani yaaderra dheerata.
Abdulhamid inch two HANGA-1.SG.NOM 1.SG.NOM thought-IRRA gets-tall
‘Abdulhamid is 2 inches taller than I thought.’

I show that these data can be given a unified analysis if *hanga* is considered to be a function that finds the length of an interval, the inchoative morphology is considered to be a function that maps an individual’s height to the end of a rising interval of a scale, and *irra* is considered to map an individual’s height to the start of an interval. Under such an analysis, in the differential in (5), *hanga* combines with the standard phrase *-n ani yaaderra* ‘than I thought’ which in turn combines with the inchoative predicate which then combines with *inch lama* ‘two inches’ to give the meaning ‘gets tall by two inches from the extent that I thought’.

Traditional analyses (Cresswell 1976; von Stechow 1984) have considered degrees to refer to points on a scale. This line of analysis has proved problematic with certain entailment environments and quantifier scopes (Schwarzschild & Wilkinson 2002, Schwarzschild 2013). I suggest that the Oromo data is another case where scale segment semantics allows for a more parsimonious analysis. In addition to providing support for directed scale segment analyses of degree constructions, this study provides a first overview and analysis of degree constructions in Eastern Oromo.

References

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