

Morphosyntax-semantics mapping in the grammar of property concepts: A view from English, Mandarin, and beyond

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Two cross-linguistically pervasive and semantically relevant oppositions in the grammar of property concepts are: the positive–comparative opposition (e.g., English ‘wise’ vs. ‘wiser’) and the adjectival–nominal opposition (e.g., English ‘wise’ vs. ‘wisdom’). In this talk, based in part on joint work with Yiwen Zhang, I ask: how does each of these oppositions’ morphosyntactic relationship relate to its semantic relationship, and how, if at all, do those morphosyntax-semantic relations vary cross-linguistically? Toward an answer to this question, I argue for three main proposals: (1) The cross-linguistically pervasive nullness of positive semantics can be fruitfully accounted for by analyzing positive semantics as contextual domain restriction of a quantifier supplied either by the adjective itself (in the case of adjectival property concept words) or by a possessive morpheme (in the case of nominal property concept words); (2) Adjectival property concept predicates (e.g., ‘be wise’) are truth-conditionally and in some cases model-theoretically equivalent to their possessed nominal counterparts (e.g., ‘have wisdom’); (3) A comparison of English and Mandarin property concept predicates reveals that many English derivationally complex adjectives have phrasal possessive counterparts in Mandarin, suggesting that the typological distinction between relatively synthetic vs. relatively analytic languages constitutes one source of cross-linguistic variation in the grammar of property concepts.