

Tiwa *khúp*: A degree modifier in the verb phrase
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Overview. We examine the intensifier *khúp* in Tiwa (Tibeto-Burman; India), arguing that despite initial appearances, *khúp* has the same semantics as English *very*. Differences in distribution stem from their syntax: English *very* only modifies adjectives, limiting its distribution to a small set of gradable stative predicates, but Tiwa *khúp* modifies verb phrases, allowing it to occur with a much wider range of predicates.

Background. Tiwa, a member of the Bodo-Garo subgroup of Tibeto-Burman, is spoken primarily in Assam, India. All data presented here come from the first author’s work with four speakers in Assam 2015-2023. Tiwa has an intensifier *khúp*, often translated as English *very*, which can occur with gradable stative predicates like ‘tall’ (1). However, *khúp* has a wider distribution than English *very*, also occurring with eventive predicates like ‘dance’ (2).

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| <p>(1) Rupson khúp chu-w.
Rupson KHUP tall-NEUT
‘Rupson is very tall.’</p> | <p>(2) Maria khúp misâ-ga.
Maria KHUP dance-PFV
‘Maria danced a lot.’</p> |
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When *khúp* occurs with gradable stative predicates, it conveys that the predicate holds to a contextually high degree on the scale introduced by the predicate itself, just like *very*. When *khúp* occurs with eventive predicates, it conveys that there were (contextually speaking) many events, as in (3), or there was a single event that can be measured in some way as exceeding a contextually determined standard, as in (4).

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| <p>(3) Ang khúp torgâ aw-ga.
1SG KHUP door open-PFV
‘I opened the door so many times.’</p> | <p>(4) Saldi khúp plaw-ga.
Saldi KHUP forget-PFV
‘Saldi has forgotten so much.’</p> |
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It’s known that languages can use different semantic means to intensify predicates (Barker 2002, McNabb 2012, Beltrama & Bochnak 2015, i.a.). What kind of intensifier is *khúp* then? Does its semantics rely on degrees, like *very*, or does it achieve intensification through other means? We argue that *khúp* does directly operate on degrees, and further that it can and should be analyzed as having the same semantics as *very*.

***khúp* as a degree modifier.** While *khúp* appears with a wider range of predicates than *very* does, it cannot appear with non-gradable predicates. This is shown clearly in (5) with the predicate ‘die’. This sentence is uniformly rejected by speakers. (5) also shows that *khúp* cannot receive a veridicality reading, on which the speaker is affirming the truth of their assertion (cf. English *really*). Speakers comment that the only reading available to (5) is the impossible one on which Rupson died many times, similar to (3) above.

- (5) # Rupson **khúp** thi-ga.
Rupson KHUP die-PFV
Intended: ‘Rupson really did die.’

By examining the full range of predicates that *khúp* can modify, a generalization emerges: predicates that can appear in a comparative can be modified by *khúp*. That is, it appears with gradable predicates. From this we conclude that *khúp* operates on degrees, in the same way that comparatives do.

Analysis. We propose that *khúp* has the same semantics as degree-modifying intensifiers like English *very*, which we formalize in (6), drawing on Kennedy & McNally’s (2005) analysis. In prose, *khúp* takes in a gradable (type $\langle d, et \rangle$) predicate and an individual, and returns the proposition that there is some degree to which the predicate G holds of the individual and that degree greatly exceeds the standard for what counts as G in the context. This yields the attested reading for sentences like (1), as shown in (7): there is some degree to which Rupson is tall, and that degree significantly exceeds the standard for what counts as tall in the context.

- (6) $\llbracket khúp \rrbracket^c = \lambda G_{\langle d, et \rangle} . \lambda x . \exists d [G(x, d) \wedge d > ! \text{standard}(G, c)]$
(7) $\llbracket (1) \rrbracket^c = \exists d [\text{tall}(\text{Rupson}, d) \wedge d > ! \text{standard}(\text{tall}, c)]$

A key benefit of this analysis is that, like *very* (Kennedy & McNally 2005), *khúp* is sensitive to scale structure. Specifically, sentences in which *khúp* is combined with a maximum standard gradable predicate like ‘dry’ are judged to be degraded, as shown in (8). Since being ‘dry’ requires being totally dry, the cloth cannot greatly exceed the contextually determined standard for dryness. Speakers offer alternative sentences with focus morphology to achieve an effect similar to English *completely*, as shown in (9).

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| (8) | ?? Pe ré khúp rán-ga.
that cloth KHUP dry-PFV
?? ‘That cloth is very dry.’ | (9) | Pe ré rán-ga-lô-bó.
that cloth dry-PFV-FOC-PART
‘That cloth is completely dry.’ |
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The semantics given for *khúp* in (6) allows it to straightforwardly combine with lexically gradable predicates like ‘tall’. We assume that non-lexically gradable predicates contain a silent degree operator, which can introduce degrees measuring numbers of events, the quantity of an internal argument, or any other relevant dimension, based on the context. Crucially, this silent operator is independently required in comparative constructions in Tiwa (and other languages), to allow non-lexically gradable predicates to be compared. That is, the same silent operator that allows the ‘buy’-based predicate in (10) to be modified by *khúp*, is also found in the comparative in (11). (See Dawson 2020, 2021 for more on comparatives in Tiwa.)

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| (10) | a. Ang kashóng khúp pre-ga.
1SG dress KHUP buy-PFV
‘I bought a lot of dresses.’
b. $\exists d[\text{buy}(\text{speaker}, d\text{-many dresses}) \wedge d > ! \text{standard}(\text{dress-buying}, c)]$ |
| (11) | a. Lastoi-ne ré-gô pre-wa-na khúli Milton lái-gô parâ pre-ga.
Lastoi-GEN cloth-ACC buy-NMLZ-INF than Milton book-ACC more buy-PFV
‘Milton bought more books than Lastoi bought cloths.’
b. $\exists d[\text{buy}(\text{Milton}, d\text{-many books}) \wedge \neg \text{buy}(\text{Lastoi}, d\text{-many cloths})]$ |

(Note that while comparatives and predicates modified by *khúp* can both contain the same degree operator, *khúp* itself (like *very*) does not have comparative semantics. Unlike Tiwa comparatives, sentences like (1) are not licensed in contexts in which the degree to which the predicate holds only slightly exceeds the contextual standard (eg. Rupson is 135cm and the other men are between 130 and 134cm). Instead, like *very*, *khúp* entails a significant gap between the degree to which the predicate holds and the standard.)

The syntax of *khúp*. Non-lexically gradable predicates in English can also appear in comparatives, but *very* cannot modify them. We propose that this key difference between English *very* and Tiwa *khúp* boils down to syntax: while *very* is syntactically restricted to modifying adjectives, *khúp* modifies verb phrases. As a consequence, any gradable predicate that can appear in a VP can be modified by *khúp* in Tiwa, while only adjectival gradable predicates can be modified with *very* in English. This difference is not surprising in light of the fact that the majority of predicates in Tiwa, including gradable statives, are verbs. (Relative clause constructions are used to allow these verbs to modify nouns. The few true adjectives that Tiwa has appear with a copular verb when they function as the main predicate of the sentence.)

Conclusion. The existence of Tiwa *khúp* shows that a degree modifier with the same semantics as *very* can modify non-lexically gradable predicates, using the same silent degree operator independently found in comparative constructions. That *very* cannot do the same is an accident of syntax: it is restricted to modifying adjectives. More broadly, the Tiwa data show that the same sort of degree modifier can appear in languages that lexicalize the majority of their gradable stative predicates as verbs, rather than adjectives.

Selected references. Barker. 2002. The dynamics of vagueness. *L&P* 25. • Beltrama & Bochnak. 2015. Intensification without degrees cross-linguistically. *NLLT* 33. • Kennedy & McNally. 2005. Scale structure, degree modification, and the semantics of gradable predicates. *Language* 81 • McNabb. 2012. Cross-categorical modification of properties in Hebrew and English. *SALT* 22.