Lake Pátzcuaro P’urhepecha and the Semantic Typology of Degree Constructions
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Degree constructions are an area of grammar marked by considerable crosslinguistic variation (Beck et al. 2009, a.o.). To contribute to the project of understanding this variation, I investigate the degree system of Lake Pátzcuaro P’urhepecha (LPP; central-western Mexico). P’urhepecha, an isolate, is an agglutinating language with fairly free constituent order. But although P’urhepecha is both historically unrelated to and typologically unlike English, LPP has a degree system strikingly similar to that of English, though not identical. LPP therefore bucks the trend of understudied languages turning out to have rather “unfamiliar” degree systems.

Background. Beck et al. (2009) propose that languages’ degree systems are regulated by three parameters. The Degree Semantics Parameter determines whether or not a language has predicates that take at least one argument of type d (degree). The Degree Abstraction Parameter determines whether or not a language allows binding of degree variables in the syntax. Finally, the Degree Phrase Parameter determines whether or not a language allows the degree argument slot of a gradable predicate to be filled in overt syntax. I investigate the LPP degree system by applying to LPP Beck et al.’s diagnostics for determining the setting of these parameters.

Findings: parameter settings. If a language has a positive setting for the Degree Semantics Parameter, we may expect it to have expressions that plausibly manipulate degree arguments (such as -ER or TOO); difference comparatives such as I’m a foot taller than you; and comparison with a degree, as in I’m taller than five feet. Lake Pátzcuaro P’urhepecha has all three.

If a language has a “yes” setting for the Degree Phrase Parameter, it may be expected to allow degree questions (How tall are you?), measure phrases (She’s six feet tall), and subcomparatives (She’s taller than the table is long). Again, LPP has all of these. Although Beck et al.’s tests for the setting of the Degree Abstraction Parameter give much more equivocal results in LPP, the evidence suggests that LPP has a positive setting for this parameter as well.

Analysis. LPP, then, has positive settings for all three degree parameters, just like English. I account for this by extending to LPP the semantic analysis of degree constructions proposed in Heim (2001), on which gradable predicates are of type <d,et>, and degree morphemes compare the maxima of sets of degrees. On this analysis, some degree morphemes head DegPs of type <dt,t>—generalized degree quantifiers that take scope by movement—predicting that some DegPs should participate in scope ambiguities. I show that this prediction is borne out in LPP: in sentences like (1), the underlined DegP may scope either below or above the intensional verb.

(1) Maria ueka-sín-Ø-di pia-ni xani tapete-cha-ni eska... ✓ want » so
Mary want-HAB-PRS-IND+3 buy-INF so rug-PL-ACC that... ✓ so » want
‘Mary wants to buy so many rugs that…’

Conclusion. The findings situate Lake Pátzcuaro P’urhepecha typologically as a language that makes full use of degrees as a basic semantic type and of abstraction over degrees. LPP and English have very similar degree systems even though their grammars differ conspicuously along a number of other dimensions, suggesting that crosslinguistic variation in degree systems may be largely independent of variation in other areas of grammar.