

Superlatives in Taiwanese

Yenchun Lin

National Cheng Kung University

Superlatives are used to reveal the extreme degree of a state or of an activity. However, in Taiwanese, superlatives revealed inconsistently in the syntactic representations; there are mainly two types of superlatives: (1) superlatives with *-kah4* in connecting with the state (e.g., *khun3 kah4 m7-chai1 lang5* ‘sleep-KAH-cannot recognize people’), (2) superlatives without combination phrase (e.g., *khi3-si2* ‘angry-die’). This paper aims to analyze the superlatives in Taiwanese by employing aspectual approach which classifies verbs according to their temporal properties (Vendler 1957:157, Dowty 1979:37). Data based on corpus make the taxonomy of superlatives being established according to their similarities in syntactic representations. The result shows that superlatives in different subcategories of superlative construction fall into distinct temporal classes.

1. Introduction

Superlatives are used to convey the extreme degree of a state or of an activity. For example, in Mandarin, *zui* ‘most’ is usually used to form a superlative (e.g., *zui kao* ‘tallest’). In Taiwanese, superlatives are usually revealed in extent (e.g., *khun3-kah4 m7-chai1 lang5* ‘sleep-KAH-cannot recognize anyone’) and resultative constructions (e.g., *peⁿ7-kah4 khia7-be7-khi2-lai5* ‘sick-KAH- cannot stand up’). Resultative and extent construction are two of the postverbal secondary predicates in Taiwanese which usually involves the use of *-kah* on the surface (Lin, 2003:65). Also, according to Wang (2002:298), to form a completed adjective term describing ‘extent’ in Mandarin, the adverbial predicate *heng* ‘very’, *cin* ‘really’ or *zui* ‘most’ is necessary (e.g., *hua heng hing* ‘flower-very-red’ vs. **hua hong*). However, based on the corpus of ‘Taiwen/Huawen Ding Xiang Cidian’ (台文/華文頂線辭典), it is found superlatives in the syntactic representations revealed inconsistently; superlatives without adverbial predicate as combination also exist in Taiwanese (e.g., *khi3-si2* ‘angry-die’). Few of previous investigations on Taiwanese deal with the inconsistency between the two Taiwanese superlatives. Thus, the present study intends to explore the two types of superlatives: (1)

superlatives with *-kah4* in connecting with the state (e.g., *khun3 kah4 m7-chai1 lang5* ‘sleep-KAH-cannot recognize anyone’), (2) superlatives without adverbial predicates as combination (e.g., *khi3-si2* ‘angry-die’).

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 deals with *V-kah*-superlative construction. Section 3 focuses on the second type of superlative, that is, *V*-superlatives. In section 4, we offer accounts on the divergent distribution of superlatives. The last section is the discussion of this paper.

2. *V-kah*-superlative

This section explores *V-kah*-superlative configuration. Following observations made from corpus, *V-kah*-superlatives fall into two construction: resultative and extent constructions (2.1). Besides, phrasal negation is found to exist consistently in *V-kah*-superlative construction (2.2).

2.1. *V-kah*-superlative in extent and resultative constructions

There are two types of *V-kah*-superlative constructions. In the resultative construction, resultatives follow the main verb. Instead of purely denoting the extent reading ‘... to the extent that...’, *V-kah*-superlative classified as resultative construction involves result state in sentences. The resultative complement is usually present in an adjective form. As in examples (1)-(3), the adjectives *ang5-ki3-ki3* ‘red to a degree’, *pa2-tiuⁿ3-tiuⁿ3* ‘very full’ and *chhui3-ko5-ko5* ‘fragmented’ are resultative complements of the main verb *khau3* ‘cry’, *chiah8* ‘eat’ and *thiah4* ‘take apart’.

(1) Bak8-chiu1 khau3-kah4 ang5-ki3-ki3

eyes cry-KAH very red

‘(Someone) cried so heavily that (her/his) eyes become red.’

(2) Chiah8-kah4 pa2-tiuⁿ3-tiuⁿ3

eat-KAH full-distend-distend

‘(Someone) eat too much so that stomach become distend’

(3) Ka1 A7-min5 sin1 chiun7 e5 tiun1-a2-san1 thiah4-kah4

KA A-min body up E silk-fabric take apart-KAH

chhui3-ko5-ko5

fragmented

However, when applying to describing the extreme state, the complements in resultative *V-kah*-superlative constructions turn from adjectives to phrase. For example, in (4)-(6), the phrase *khia7-be7-khi2-lai5* ‘cannot stand up’, *bo5-siaⁿ1* ‘lose voice’ and *be7-kong2-oe7* ‘unable to speak’ serve as the complements to *peⁿ7* ‘sick’, *khau3* ‘cry’ and

*kia*ⁿ1 ‘frighten’.

- (4) I1 peⁿ7-kah4 khia7-be7-khi2-lai5.
 3SG sick-KAH stand-NEG-up-go

‘He was so sick that he could not stand up.’

- (5) Na5-au5 khau3-kah4 bo5-siaⁿ1
 Throat cry-KAH NEG-voice

‘(Someone) cry so heavily that (s/he) lost voice.’

- (6) I1 hoo7 kiaⁿ1-kah4 be7-kong2-oe7
 3SG HOO frighten-KAH NEG-speak-word

‘He was so frightened that he could not speak.’

The resultative construction is complex event composed of two subevents: the causing event and the changing of the state it generates. Dowty in 1979:37 suggested that the notion of ‘endpoint’ denotes the result state which can determine the telicity of verbs. Whether in the pure resultative construction or in the resultative construction conveying the extent, result states modify the predicates of subject or object. According to Rappaport Hovav and Levin (2005:89), resultatives place restrict constraints on their constituent subevent, that is, the second subevent in resultative’s event structure must be telic. However, in Taiwanese, pure resultatives such as (1) and the resultative *V-kah*-superlative construction such as (4) differ in their temporal representation. According to the notion of ‘telicity’ proposed by Vendler (1957:157), sentence (1) *Bak8-chiu1 khau3-kah4 ang5-ki3-ki3* ‘(Someone) cried so heavily that (her/his) eyes become red’ can be interpreted as an accomplishment event. Basically, sentence (1) has a telic construal. Sentence (4) *I1 peⁿ7-kah4 khia7-be7-khi2-lai5* ‘He was so sick that he could not stand up’ cannot be modified by a durative time adverbial which describes the duration of an event.

In addition to the resultative *V-kah*-superlative construction, there is another postverbal secondary predicate revealing the extreme state of an activity or an event. For example:

- (7) I1 khun3-kah4 m7-chai1-lang5.
 3SG sleep-KAH NEG-know-people

‘He sleep so well that he couldn’t recognize anyone.’

- (8) Boe2-a2 siuⁿ7-kah4 bo5-po7, khi3 chheng2-kau3 pat8-lang5
 finally think- KAH NEG-step go consult other-people

‘Finally, (someone) couldn’t figure out solutions, (s/he) then consulted others.’

- (9) In1 pheh4-pheh4-chhoan2, che7 ti7 chioh8-thau5 teng2 thiam2-kah4
 3PL PHEH-PHEH -puff sit at stone top tired-KAH
 bo5-oe7-kong2
 NEG-word-speak

‘They were out of breath so that they sat at the stone and without saying any word.’

Unlike resultative *V-kah*-superlative construction, the extent construction purely describes the extreme degree of a certain state. The extent clause cannot be construed as the result, but just the extent as in (7), where *m7-chai1-lang5* ‘cannot recognize people’ cannot be said to be the result of sleeping but just is the extent to which the person slept. Also, extent clause in (8) *bo5-po7* ‘no solution’ and in (9) *bo5-oe7-kong2* ‘no words to speak’ only function as the adverbials describing the state *siuⁿ7* ‘think’ and *thiam2* ‘tire’. In extent *V-kah*-superlative constructions, the sentences also have telic construal.

It is founded that resultative constructions often have an extent reading, though, the opposite does not hold; that is, extent constructions do not necessarily have a result reading. Both resultative and extent *V-kah*-superlative constructions denote the extreme degree of an activity or a state, though, they differ in the syntactic behavior (Lin, 2003:70). Resultative constructions are complements subcategorized for by *V-kah*. In most cases, resultative clauses are predicated of either the subject or the object of the main verb. On the other hand, extent construction forms the structure of a clause attached to VP.

2.2. Phrasal negation

Although the two subtypes of *V-kah*-superlative constructions denote variant syntactic behaviors, the components of ‘superlative’ reveal an agreement on their selections. Firstly, superlative in both resultative and extent constructions is constructed as a phrase.

- (10) I1 cho3-kah4 chin1 thiam2
 3SG work-KAH really tired

‘He worked so hard that he felt tired.’

- (11) I1 khun3-kah4 m7-chai1-chheⁿ2
 3SG sleep-KAH NEG-know-wake

‘He sleep so well that he did not wake up.’

- (12) Niau1-a1 ka1 chhai3-na5 ka7-kah4 chhui3- chhui3
 cat-A KA basket bite-KAH fragmented

‘The cat beat the basket and let it became fragmented.’

- (13) I1 hoo7 thau5-ke1 ap4-pek4-kah4 be7-chhoan2-khui3
 3SGL HOO boss press-KAH NEG-breathe
 ‘He was pressed by his boss.’

Examples (10)-(11) are extent constructions and (12)-(13) resultatives. When simply describing the state, the complements followed by *V-kah* revealed as adjectives, such as (10) *chin1-thiam2* ‘tire’ and (12) *chhui3- chhui3* ‘fragmented’. On the other hand, extent and resultatives applied to convey an extreme state such as in (11) and (13) present as sentences in which superlatives are phrases *m7-chai1-chhe*ⁿ² ‘not knowing wake’ and *be7-chhoan2-khui3* ‘cannot breathe’.

Besides, in the *V-kah*-superlative constructions, the feature [+negative] is included in sentence. For example, we repeated the example (10) (represented as (14))and (12) (represented as (15))and insert the [+negative] feature into those sentences, finding an ungrammatical constructions:

- (14) I1 cho3-kah4 *be7/ bo5/m7-chin1 thiam2
 3SG work- KAH * NEG-really- tired
 ‘He worked so hard that he felt not tired.’
- (15) Niau1-a1 ka1 chhai3-na5 ka7-kah4 *be7/ bo5/m7-chhui3- chhui3
 cat-A KA basket beat-KAH *NEG-fragmented
 ‘The cat beat the basket and let it became not fragmented.’

In Taiwanese, the negative adverbial involves: *be5*, *m7*, *bo5*, etc. and each of them fall into distinct categorization or perform different syntactic representations which have been explored by some studies (e.g., Lu 2003 cited from Zhang, Liao & Huang 2006: 3). With these adverbials *be5*, *m7*, *bo5*, the whole complement becomes negative one.

As demonstrated in this section, *V-kah*-superlative conveys specific syntactic and semantic representations. According to the constructional view proposed by Goldberg (1995:25), construction with similar components needs to be resided in the syntactic context. In resultative *V-kah*-superlative construction, the result is denoted while in extent *V-kah*-superlative configuration, the clause purely conveys the degree of certain state. The similarities in the two structures are: (1) they have atelic construal and (2) the phrasal negation is required in the complement.

3. V-superlatives

The previous section presents findings from an examination of the *V-kah*-superlative data.

In expressing the extreme situations, there is another construction existed in Taiwanese. In this section, we explore the second type of superlatives. In the following examples (16)-(18), the superlatives *si2* ‘dead’, *pho3* ‘break’ and *soaⁿ3* ‘spread’ followed directly by the main verb *khi3* ‘angry’, *siuⁿ7* ‘think’ and *chhoe1* ‘blow’.

- (16) Ka7 i1 khi3 si2
 KA 3SG angry dead
 ‘(Someone) has irritated him to death.’
- (17) I1 siuⁿ7 pho3 thau5 ma7 siuⁿ7-bo5
 3SG think break head still think-NEG
 ‘He couldn’t think out of any solution even though he tried his best.’
- (18) Choa2 hoo7 chhoe1 soaⁿ3
 paper HOO blow spread
 ‘The paper was blew and spread to everywhere.’

If we inserted *-kah* into these constructions, the sentences then become ungrammatical as in (19).

- (19) Phoa4-pen7 hoo7 i1 thiaⁿ3-*kah4 si2
 Sick HOO 3SG hurt-*KAH dead
 ‘He was so sick that he felt hurt to death.’

In V-superlative construction, the complement such as *si2* ‘dead’ in (16) has the properties of telic eventuality. Most of the time, superlatives in the construction with zero combination denote the result of the main verb.

However, as having been proposed by Wang (2002:298), to form a grammatical expression in Mandarin, adjective predicates must be combined with the adverbs such as *hen* ‘very’, *zhen* ‘really’ and *ji* ‘utmost’ in the following examples:

- (20) Hua hen hong
 flower very red
 ‘The flower is very red.’
- (21) Tian-qi zhen cha
 weather really bad

‘The weather is really bad.’

- (22) zhe-lie-de feng-jing ji mei
 here-DE scene utmost beautiful
 ‘The scene here is very beautiful.’

Without the adverbial connection, the sentences then become ungrammatical as in (23)-(24).

- (23) *Yezi Ø lu
 *leaves Ø green
 ‘The leaves are green.’

- (24) *Ta Ø mei
 *3SG Ø pretty
 ‘She is very beautiful.’

In Taiwanese, the *s*-command also requires an adverb to connect the complement with its main verb in a sentence; thus, the adverb *-kah* should exist as it is in the first type *V-kah*-superlative construction. However, it is found that in modern Mandarin there is an ellipsis of the adverbs, for example:

- (25) Ta qi-feng le
 3SG angry-crazy PERF
 ‘He was so angry that he became crazy.’

- (26) Shu-gui sai-bao le shu
 bookcase stuff-explode PERF book
 ‘The bookcase was full of books.’

In example (25) and (26), the phrases *qi-feng* ‘angry-die’ and *sai-bao* ‘stuff-explode’ are lexicalized as compounds. The insertion of adverb *-hen-* will cause the sentence ungrammatical. Huang (2007:9) explored the Mandarin superlative *bao* ‘explode’. In his study, *bao* ‘explode’ functions as complement and extent adverbials followed by the main verb after the language contact with Cantonese. Since both Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese belong to Han language (Lin, 2003:68), the contact of Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese may influences Taiwanese superlatives on their syntactic representations.

Compared with Mandarin Chinese, there is less number of extent adverbs in Taiwanese. Also, Taiwanese set more restraints on the function and distributions of extent adverbs. After all, it is suggested that the syntactic behavior of the Taiwanese adverbs *-kah* has been affected along with the diachronic language development.

4. V-superlative vs. V-*kah*-superlatives

In section 2, we explore V-*kah*-superlative constructions and in section 3 the V-*kah* configurations. The specific characteristics that distinguish these two types of superlative constructions are explored in-depth in this section. Firstly, they differ in the telicity denoting (4.1). Further, the complements in those two types are of distinct construal, the phrasal negation only exist in V-*kah*-superlative configuration (4.2).

4.1. Telicity in V-superlative and in V-*kah*-superlative

Observing the data from the corpus, it is found that V-superlative and V-*kah*-superlative are temporally distinct. According to the verb types proposed by Dowty (1979:37), verb serves as complement in V-*kah*-superlative can either be activity verb as in (27) or state verb as in (28). On the contrary, verb acts as complement in V-superlative construction fall into the group of achievement as in (29).

(27) I1 thiaⁿ³-kah4 khia7-be7-khi2-lai5
 3 SG hurt- KAH stand- NEG -up-come
 ‘He was so hurt that he couldn’t stand up.’

(28) Sim1-koaⁿ¹-thau5 kiaⁿ¹-kah4 m7-chai1 beh4 an2-choaⁿ²
 heart frighten-KAH NEG-know BEH how-do
 ‘(Someone) was so frightened that he didn’t know how to do.’

(29) I1 e5 chhiu2 thiaⁿ³-si2 a2
 3SG GEN hand hurt-dead PART
 ‘His hand was hurt to death.’

The activity verb *khia7* ‘stand’ and the state verb *chai1* ‘know’ fall into the groups that have atelic interpretations. In contrast, the achievement verb *si2* ‘dead’ has the property of telicity. It is found that some of the V-superlative construction can be inserted into the adverbial connection *-kah* while co-occur with the modal *beh4* ‘will/ want’. For example:

(30) I1 pa2-kah4 beh4 si2
 3SG full-KAH will dead
 ‘He was extremely full.’

- (31) I1 e5 thau5 siuⁿ7-kah4 beh4 phoa3 khi3
 3SG GEN head think-KAH will break go
 ‘He tried hard thinking of the solution with his head being about to break.’

When inserting the model *beh4* ‘will/ want’, the degree of a certain state or an activity is decreased. Compared with the superlative *si2* ‘dead’, the superlative clause *beh4-si2* ‘be going to die’ in (30) does not denoting the extremeness. Similarly, *phoa3* ‘break’ and *beh4-phoa3* ‘be going to break’ differ in their power of modifying the degree. This finding again supports that V-superlative has a telic reading.

In addition the model *beh4*, V-superlative is found to co-occur with *-kah4* when the locomotive *khi3* ‘go’ exist as complete marker. For example,

- (32) San1 kin2-kah4 phoa3-khi3
 clothe tight-KAH break-go
 ‘The clothe was so tight that it broke.’

As been proposed by Cheng (2005:89), *khi3* ‘go’ acts as complete phase. This again suggested V-superlative should fall in telic reading.

4.2. Superlatives in V-kah-superlative and V-superlative

It is found that complements in the two types of superlative constructions behave differently. In V-kah-superlative construction, phrasal negation is required; however, in V-superlative construction, phrasal negation is blocked.

- (34) *I1 siuⁿ7 khun3 be7 loh8-bin5
 *3SG think sleep NEG-fall-asleep
 ‘He thought too much to sleep.’
- (35) *thak8-chu1 thak8 boe7-ki1 si5-kan1
 *study-book study NEG-remember time
 ‘(Someone) studied so hard that (he) forgot the time.’

In summary, in Taiwanese, the two types of superlatives show inconsistency in their syntactic representations as well as in their semantic features. Telicity decides their classification. In addition, phrasal use exists only in V-kah-superlative.

5. Discussion

Based on the corpora data, there are two categories of superlative constructions in Taiwanese: V-superlative and V-*kah*-superlative. The two types of superlative constructions reveal varied syntactic and semantic behavior.

Within the V-*kah*-superlative construction, there are two sub-types: resultative and extent constructions. They are both postverbal complements, though, they differ in some aspects. For one, resultative V-*kah*-superlative construction denotes the result state while extent construction only has adjective reading. Besides, in most cases, resultative clauses are predicated of either the subject or the object of the main verb. On the other hand, extent construction forms the structure of a clause attached to VP.

As for V-superlative configuration, the language contact influences the adverbial connections and thus *-kah4* be took out.

Compared V-*kah*-superlative with V-superlative constructions, they act quite differently in syntactic and semantic representation. Firstly, the temporal aspect—telicity—distinguished the two constructions. Complements of V-superlative construction is telic property while in V-*kah*-superlative is an atelic expression. Besides, the use of negative phrase represents grammaticality only in V-*kah*-superlative construction.

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