

Being assertive in Mandarin Chinese
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Under some conditions, gradable adjectives in Mandarin must co-occur with an overt degree expression (most neutrally, *hen* 'very') for positive interpretation:

- (1) zhangsan #(hen) gao.
Zhangsan very tall
'Zhangsan is tall.'

While this peculiarity has led some scholars (Liu 2005, Huang 2006) to propose that bare adjectives in Mandarin are of the wrong semantic type to combine directly with a subject, I present data showing that it is only when a gradable adjective is the entire predicate of a matrix-level, declarative clause that it requires an overt degree expression for positive interpretation. I argue therefore that there is nothing peculiar about the semantics of adjectives in Mandarin and that rather, the phenomenon in (1) is due to an independent constraint in Mandarin that matrix-level assertions be realized with overt VP-external functional morphology. Independent evidence for this approach comes from research showing that Mandarin event-denoting predicates require overt aspectual morphology when used in assertions (Klein et al. 2000). Ultimately, this proposal supports the view that in some languages, morphology in the inflectional layer contributes to assertive illocutionary force: in English, tense provides this force (Klein 1998, 2006), and in Mandarin, which has no grammatical tense (Hu et al. 2001), other heads such as degree and aspect are used instead.