Scality, degree reading and maximality in a Mandarin numeral construction

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This paper investigates the semantics of an understudied Mandarin numeral construction type, here dubbed da-NumPs (i.e. number word < da 'big' < noun). Drawing primarily upon evidence from online Mandarin corpora, we argue for a taxonomy of this construction that comprises two distinct interpretations, based on the scalarity of the morpheme da and its composition with the other constituents within the construction. Specifically, one reading of da-NumPs is a degree superlative reading, in which da relates a domain of comparison, denoted by the nominal argument, to a plural group of entities ranked along the upper bound of a contextually determined scale. Second, da-NumPs have a definite description reading, in which da behaves on a par with a maximality-denoting iota operator, such that the construction refers to the maximal group individual that satisfies the property denoted by the nominal argument. We further show that at the discourse level, both readings encode the way the speaker subjectively construes the situation being described, indicating the speaker’s evaluative attitude towards the significance of said situation. This pragmatic condition distinguishes the use of da-NumPs against that of alternative, truth-conditionally identical numeral construction types. We further propose that in cases where the nominal component includes a degree argument, a process of degree intensification enables the definite description reading to verify the same situation as is licensed under a superlative semantics. We show that this process provides a way to make sense of the systematic ambiguity available to da-NumPs, and allows us to capture its polysemy.

Keywords: da-NumPs, superlatives, scalar semantics, definiteness, Chinese