Formal and Semantic Markedness Alignment in Ersu Degree Constructions

Ying Gong

1. Introduction

The Ersu language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family, and is primarily spoken by a small community in southwest China's "Tibetan-Yi Corridor" – an area of the deep river valleys and high mountains spanning the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Tibet in China. The language overtly marks positive and negative antonyms with the morpheme *ya-*: Positive dimensional adjectives (gradable adjectives that are associated with measurable, concrete physical properties like length and size) typically occur in the form of a monosyllabic root prefixed with *ya-*, whereas their negative counterparts are often reduplicated or inherently disyllabic, without *ya-*.

(1) ida təwo ***(ya-)kʰua/dʐ̩odʐ̩o/mala**.
bed this ya-big/short/small
'This bed is big/short/small.'

(2) ida ***(ya-)kʰua/dʐ̩odʐ̩o/mala** təwo
bed ya-big/short/small this
'this big/short/small bed'

As shown in (1) and (2), regardless whether the adjective is in a predicative or attributive position, *ya-* is required in positive-antonym but not negative-antonym positive constructions. The same forms are used in comparatives, with the standard introduced by the adposition *tɕʰo* 'on, at (the top of)', as exemplified in (3).

(3) ida təwo ssyida tɕʰo ***(ya-)kʰua/dʐ̩odʐ̩o/mala**.
bed this bench on ya-big/short/small
'This bed is bigger/shorter/smaller than the bench.'

Previous studies suggest that *ya-* is an adjective-forming prefix that is obligatorily attached to monosyllabic roots in Ersu (Zhang 2013). However, there are cases where *ya-* may be absent with positive antonyms, leaving the adjective monosyllabic; it may also co-occur with negative antonyms that are not monosyllabic. For example, *ya-* is optional in positive-antonym degree questions, as shown in (4):

(4) ssyida tsʰopa **(ya-)ʂə** ɛ?
bench how ya-big ITRG
'How long is the bench?'

(5) A: That bench is so short!
B: te tsʰopa **ʂə/#ya-ʂə** ɛ?
it how long/ya-long ITRG
'How long is it?'

Note that the presence of *ya-* in (4) gives rise to a reading that can be described as *evaluative*: the question constructed with *ya-ʂə* 'long' makes reference to a degree that exceeds the contextually valued standard of being long, giving rise to the inference that the bench is counted as 'long' in the context.

The evaluativity of the sentences in (4) can be tested by checking whether the sentence is compatible with the speaker's denial of the corresponding positive construction or the additional assertion of the antonymic negative construction (Lehrer 1985). As shown in (5), while the degree question formed with the unprefixed *ʂə* 'long' can be felicitously asked in a context where the opposing positive construction has been asserted (i.e., *This bench is short*), the question constructed with *ya-ʂə* 'long' is infelicitous in such a context, suggesting that it does carry an inference that this bench is long, which is incompatible

* Ying Gong, Boston University, yinggong@bu.edu. Many thanks to my generous language consultants for their invaluable contributions to this study: Ran Huang, Guihua Huang, and Tianniu Wang. Thanks also to my advisors and the audience from WCCFL 42. All errors remain mine.

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with the given context. Similarly, when *ya-* co-occurs with a negative-antonym in comparatives, it gives rise to an evaluative reading, as shown in (6).

(6) ida təwo **ya-ʂə**, hene ssyida təwo ida tɕʰo **dzˌodzˌo/#ya-dzˌodzˌo**.
bed this ya-long and bench this bed on short/ya-short
'This bed is long, and this bench is shorter than the bed.'

However, this contrast in evaluativity between the *ya*-less and *ya*-prefixed form is missing in positive-antonym equatives, where both forms are reported acceptable when the sentence is followed by an additional assertion of the antonymic positive construction:

(7) ida təwo ssyida dapa **ʂə/ya-ʂə**, jane ida la ssyida niugua **dzˌodzˌo**.
bed this bench reach long/ya-long but bed and bench both short
'This bed and the bench are equally long, but they are both short.'

The table below summarizes the distribution of *ya-* and evaluativity in Ersu degree constructions, illustrated with *(ya)-ʂə* 'long' and *(ya-)dzˌodzˌo* 'short'.

(8)

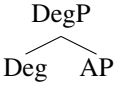
	Positive	Comparative	Equative	Degree Question
ʂə	*	*	non-eval	non-eval
ya-ʂə	eval	non-eval	non-eval	eval
dzˌodzˌo	eval	non-eval	eval	eval
ya-dzˌodzˌo	*	eval	*	*

In general, *ya-* occurs mostly with positive antonyms, yet it is optional in positive-antonym equatives and degree in negative-antonym comparatives. In those cases where *ya-* is optional, its presence is likely to give rise to an evaluative reading, except for positive-antonym equatives.

The distribution of *ya-* and its interaction with evaluativity raise two questions: First, what conditions the obligingness and optionality of *ya-* in Ersu? Second, how is the distribution of *ya-* related to the distribution of evaluativity? In this paper, I provide an analysis where the occurrence of *ya-* is regulated by an anti-monosyllabicity rule and a markedness competition in light of current theories of evaluativity (Rett 2008, 2015). I argue that while Ersu exhibits a different pattern of evaluativity from English, it constitutes a good example of formal and semantic markedness alignment regarding evaluativity, and provides additional cross-linguistic data for the current theories of evaluativity.

2. Proposal

I assume the following structure in Ersu, where gradable adjectives are combined with a functional head in the extended projection of the adjective (Abney 1987, Corver 1997, Grimshaw 1991).

(9)


Two language-specific morphophonological rules are also assumed here: (i) monosyllabic DegPs are ungrammatical, and (ii) *ya-X* and *X* are allomorphs (hence *ya-X* is truth-conditionally equivalent to *X*). Semantically, gradable adjectives denote measure functions from objects to degrees (type $\langle e, d \rangle$) (Kennedy 2001, 2007). For example, *ʂə* 'long' takes an object and returns its (positive) degree of length, whereas *dzˌodzˌo* 'short' takes an object and turns its (negative) degree of length:

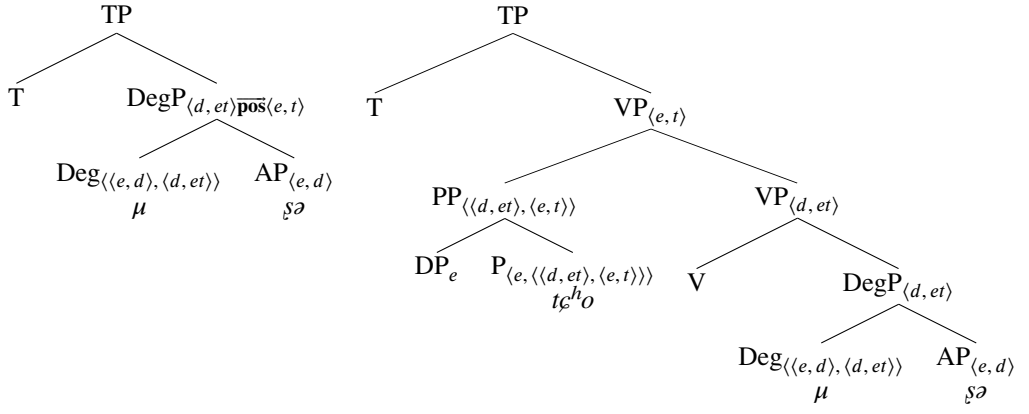
(10) a. $[\![ʂə]\!] = \lambda x.$ the degree to which x is long (shorthand as $\lambda x.\ \mathsf{long}(x)$)
b. $[\![dzˌodzˌo]\!] = \lambda x.$ the degree to which x is short (shorthand as $\lambda x.\ \mathsf{short}(x)$)

I assume also that Ersu has a functional null head μ whose function is to introduce a degree argument:

(11) $[\![\mu]\!] = \lambda g_{\langle e,d\rangle}.\ \lambda d.\ \lambda x.\ g(x) \geq d$ (Svenonius & Kennedy 2006)

The following structures are proposed for positive and comparative constructions in Ersu, both of which are derived with a μ-headed DegP, as illustrated in (12).

(12)



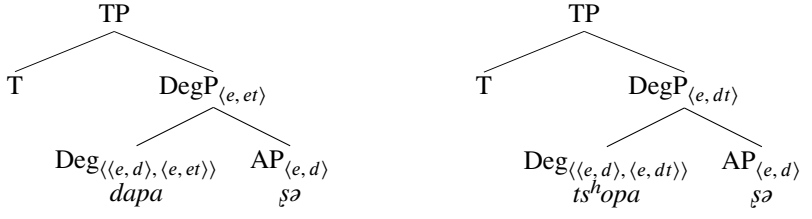
(13) a. $\overrightarrow{\textbf{pos}} = \lambda G_{\langle d,et\rangle}.\ \lambda x.\ \max(\lambda d.\ G(d)(x)) > d_s$

b. $[\![t\text{ɕ}^h o\ ]\!] = \lambda y.\ \lambda G_{\langle d,et\rangle}.\ \lambda x.\ \max(\lambda d.\ G(d)(x)) > \max(\lambda d.\ G(d)(y))$

More specifically, μ takes the gradable adjective of type $\langle e,d\rangle$ and returns a gradable predicate of type $\langle d,\langle e,t\rangle\rangle$. Positive constructions are hence derived through a type-shifting rule applied at DegP. In comparatives, the adposition *tɕʰo* 'on, at (the top of)' heads a PP which merges at the specifier position of the extended projection of the DegP. I assume with Alrenga et al. (2012) that a standard morpheme can both introduce the standard and encode the semantics of comparison. Hence, in addition to introduce the standard, *tɕʰo* also functions as a three-place comparative operator in Ersu.

On the other hand, I suggest that in equatives and degree questions, an overt degree morpheme other than μ is present at the Deg head, namely the equative operator *dapa* 'reach' and the degree *wh*-word *tsʰopa*, respectively.

(14)



(15) a. $[\![dapa]\!] = \lambda g_{\langle e,d\rangle}.\ \lambda y.\ \lambda x.\ g(x) = g(y)$

b. $[\![ts^h opa]\!] = \lambda g_{\langle e,d\rangle}.\ \lambda x.\ \lambda d.\ g(x) \geq d$

I suggest that Ersu equatives fall under the type of predicate equatives, and they do not have a weak, 'at least' interpretation like English relative equatives do. As shown below, the continuation 'in fact the bed is longer' is infelicitous after the equative (16), suggesting that (16) only has a strong, exactly interpretation.

(16) ida təwo ssyida dapa **(ya-)ʂə**, #(in fact) ida tcʰo **ya-ʂə**.
bed this bench reach ya-long bed on ya-long
'This bed equals the bench in length, #(in fact) the bed is longer.'

Given the structures, it is straightforward that the unprefixed, bare form of a monosyllabic adjective (e.g. *ʂə*) is ruled out in positive and comparative constructions, for such a form results in an illicit monosyllabic DegP (e.g. *[$_{\text{DegP}}$ μ [$_{\text{AP}}$ ʂə]]). Hence, only the *ya*-prefixed forms are allowed in those cases. On the other hand, the presence of an overt morpheme at the Deg head makes it possible for a monosyllabic morpheme to occur. Therefore, the *ya*-less form, as well as the *ya*-prefixed form, is acceptable in equatives and degree questions.

(17)

	Positives/Comparatives μ	Equatives *dapa*	Degree questions *ts^{h}opa*
ʂə	*[$_{\text{DegP}}$ μ ʂə]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ dapa ʂə]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ ts^{h}opa ʂə]
ya-ʂə	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ μ ya-ʂə]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ dapa ya-ʂə]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ ts^{h}opa ya-ʂə]

As for reduplicated or disyllabic adjectives, since their bare forms (e.g. *dʐodʐo*) already satisfy the anti-monosyllabicity rule, such a form should be allowed across the board along with the *ya*-prefixed form:

(18)

	Positives/Comparatives μ	Equatives *dapa*	Degree questions *ts^{h}opa*
dʐodʐo	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ μ dʐodʐo]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ dapa dʐodʐo]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ ts^{h}opa dʐodʐo]
ya-dʐodʐo	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ μ ya-dʐodʐo]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ dapa ya-dʐodʐo]	[$_{\text{DegP}}$ ts^{h}opa ya-dʐodʐo]

So far, this analysis regulates when *ya-* is required, namely when the DegP is monosyllabic without it. It, however, allows the *ya*-prefixed form of negative antonyms to occur in contexts where they are not actually found, i.e., in positive, equative, and degree question constructions. Also, the analysis does not yet provide an explanation of the distribution of evaluativity in these constructions. I suggest that the distribution of the *ya-* is further modulated by markedness competition. In particular, the *ya*-prefixed form of negative antonyms are ruled out in most degree constructions due to the competition with a licit *ya*-less form. Such markedness competitions also amount to the rise of evaluativity.

3. Markedness and evaluativity

Markedness refers to the way certain linguistic forms or meanings are considered more basic or neutral (unmarked), while others are more complex or specific (marked). In the case of adjectives, it is widely assumed that positive adjectives are unmarked, while their negative counterparts are marked, as negative antonyms are arguably both syntactically and semantically more complex than their positive counterparts. Heim (2006), for example, shows that negative antonyms can be decomposed into a negative component LITTLE and a corresponding positive antonym (see Moracchini (2018) for a more detailed discussion). This markedness hierarchy among positive and negative antonyms is essential in current trending theories of evaluativity, especially those given by Rett (2008, 2015).

It is observed that English degree constructions formed with negative antonyms are often evaluative, whereas their positive-antonym counterparts are often not. This includes equatives, degree questions, degree demonstratives, but not comparatives (Rett 2007, 2008). For example, while both sentences in (19) express that John and Bill are of the same height, only (19b) is evaluative, carrying the inference that Bill is 'short' in the context, and so is John; (19a) does not give rise to an analogous inference.

(19) a. John is as tall as Bill.
b. John is as short as Bill.

Rett (2015) suggests that evaluativity in degree constructions falls under the phenomenon of "marked form, marked reading". Roughly, when the negative-antonym construction is considered more marked than its positive-antonym counterpart, it is associated with the marked, evaluative reading. The mapping between the form and the reading is essentially a result of the interplay of speaker economy and hearer economy. Rett (2015) adapts Horn's (1989) Q- and P-Principle and formalizes this interplay using the Marked Meaning Principle defined as follows:

(20) The Marked Meaning Principle: For sentences (or parse trees) ϕ, ϕ' such that $\phi' \in A_{Mstr}(\phi)$ and $\phi' < \phi$, ϕ carries the Manner implicature: "$\wedge$atypical($[\![\phi]\!]$)" (Rett 2015: 102)

where $\phi' \in A_{Mstr}(\phi)$ iff ϕ' is at least as informative as ϕ, as formally defined by Rett (2015) in (21), and $\phi' < \phi$ iff ϕ' is structurally less complex than ϕ, where structural complexity is defined as in (22):

(21) M-Alternatives: Let ϕ denote a semantic object of type $\langle w, t\rangle$. The set of M-alternatives of ϕ, written as $A_{Mstr}(\phi)$ is defined as $A_{Mstr}(\phi) := \{\phi' : [\![\phi']\!] \subseteq [\![\phi]\!]\}$.

(22) Structural complexity: Let ϕ, ϕ' be parse trees. $\phi' \lesssim \phi$ if we can transform ϕ into ϕ' by a finite series of deletion, contraction and replacements of constituents in ϕ with constituents of the same category taken from $L(\phi)$.[1] $\phi' < \phi$ if $\phi' \lesssim \phi$ but not $\phi \lesssim \phi'$. (Katzir 2007)

In other words, for two sentences, ϕ and ϕ', if ϕ' is at least as informative as ϕ, and ϕ' is less complex than ϕ, the use of ϕ gives rise to the manner implicature that the content of ϕ is atypical. Rett (2015) further argues that it is this atypicality inference that amounts to evaluativity in degree constructions.

For the purpose of discussion, let us assume two formal markedness hierarchies in Ersu that follow from the structural complexity[2]:

(23) a. *ya-X* is more marked than *X*;
b. (reduplicated) negative antonyms are more marked than their corresponding (unreduplicated) positive antonyms.

Hence a sentence ϕ constructed with the unprefixed form of the adjective is less complex than a sentence ϕ' constructed with the *ya*-prefixed form. And a positive-antonym construction is less complex than its negative-antonym counterpart.

Two different cases markedness competitions are expected in Ersu, one involving positive and negative antonyms as in English, and one involving the *ya*-less and *ya*-prefixed forms. Different predictions are made depending on the *polar-(in)variance* (Rett 2008) of the degree construction. In particular, in polar-variant constructions, such as positives and comparatives, since the polarity of the adjective affects the truth conditions (cf. (24a) and (24b)), sentences formed with opposing antonyms do not count as M-alternatives of each other.

(24) a. ida təwo ssyida tɕʰo **ya-ʂə**.
bed this bench on ya-long
$max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{long}(d)(b)) > max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{long}(d)(b'))$
'This bed is longer than the bench.'
b. ida təwo ssyida tɕʰo **dz̩odz̩o**.
bed this bench on short
$\max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{short}(d)(b)) > \max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{short}(d)(b'))$
'This bed is shorter than the bench.'

Therefore, we only expect potential competitions between constructions involving the *ya*-less and *ya*-prefixed forms. On the other hand, constructions like equatives and degree questions are polar-invariant as the polarity of the adjective does *not* affect the truth conditions (cf. (25a) and (25b)), hence sentences constructed with antonymic adjectives count as M-alternatives of each other.

(25) a. ida təwo ssyida dapa **ʂə**.
bed this bench reach long
$\max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{long}(d)(b)) = \max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{long}(d)(b'))$
'This bed equals the bench in length.'

[1] $L(\phi)$ is the substitution source for ϕ, which is "the union of the lexicon of the language with the set of all subtrees of ϕ" (Katzir 2007: 685).

[2] In fact, these formal markedness hierarchies can be defined in terms of morphological complexity in Ersu. Empirical data from inchoative constructions suggests that Ersu reduplicated negative adjectives are underlyingly unreduplicated. In particular, negative adjectives occur in inchoative constructions in the form of an unreduplicated, monosyllabic root prefixed by a directional morpheme. For example, the inchoative form of 'become short' is *nə-dz̩o*, instead of **nə-dz̩odz̩o*, with *nə-* 'downward' functioning as the inchoative prefix. The fact that negative antonyms may occur unreduplicated suggests that reduplication may be a way the language uses to create marked forms, and hence negative antonyms are more marked morphologically than their positive counterparts. This patter in Ersu provides additional cross-linguistic morphological evidence that negative antonyms are more marked than their positive counterparts.

b. ida təwo ssyida dapa **dz̩odz̩o**.
bed this bench reach short
$\max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{short}(d)(b)) = \max(\lambda d\,.\,\mathsf{short}(d)(b'))$
'This bed equals the bench in shortness.'

Therefore, on top of the competition involving the *ya*-less and *ya*-prefixed forms, the competition regarding positive and negative antonyms is also expected. The table below summarizes the M-alternatives with respect to the adjective and polar-(in)variance of the construction type, illustrated with *ʂə* 'long' and *dz̩odz̩o* 'short'.

(26)

	Polar-variant (Pos and Comp)	Polar-invariant (Equa and DegQ)
ʂə	*	A_{Mstr} = {ya-ʂə, dz̩odz̩o, ya-dz̩odz̩o}
ya-ʂə	$A_{Mstr} = \varnothing$	A_{Mstr} = {ya-ʂə, dz̩odz̩o, ya-dz̩odz̩o}
dz̩odz̩o	A_{Mstr} = {ya-dz̩odz̩o}	A_{Mstr} = {ya-ʂə, dz̩odz̩o, ya-dz̩odz̩o}

Let us first consider the polar-variant constructions, namely positives and comparatives. Due to the ban on monosyllabic DegPs, the use of an unprefixed, monosyllabic adjective (e.g. *ʂə*) is ruled out in these constructions. Therefore, sentences constructed with the *ya*-prefixed form of a monosyllabic adjective (e.g. *ya-ʂə*) do not have an M-alternative that is less complex than them. Thus, such sentences do not count as marked and do not give rise to the manner implicature; they only receive the unmarked interpretation, as exemplified by positive-antonym positive and comparative constructions. It is worth noting that the evaluative reading of positive constructions is relatively unmarked, as a non-evaluative interpretation is non-informative.

On the other hand, when both the unprefixed and *ya*-prefixed form are allowed (e.g. *dz̩odz̩o* and *ya-dz̩odz̩o*), the sentence constructed with the *ya*-prefixed form has an M-alternative that is less complex than it, namely its unprefixed counterpart. Due the Marked Meaning Principle, it is predicted that the unprefixed form is associated with the unmarked reading, and the *ya*-prefixed form with the marked reading, as exemplified by negative-antonym comparatives.

Notice, however, that in the case of negative-antonym positive constructions, the *ya*-prefixed form is simply not used. This can be explained in terms of redundancy: Rett (2015) suggests that in positive constructions, evaluativity arises as a quantity implicature instead of a manner one. Suppose positive sentences constructed with the unprefixed form are associated with the unmarked, but evaluative reading, where evaluativity arises as a quantity implicature. Their *ya*-prefixed M-alternatives thus carry an additional manner implicature, which also leads to the emergency of evaluativity, rendering a reading that is essentially equivalent to the reading without such a manner implicature. Hence, simply by a conversational principle that prefers the less marked of two synonymous forms (cf. Horn's (1989) R principle; Rett's (2015) M principle), positive sentences constructed with a *ya*-prefixed negative-antonym are ruled out.

Let us now move to polar-invariant constructions. Here, in addition to the consideration of the presence of *ya*-, it needs to take into account that two sentences constructed with antonymic adjectives do count as M-alternatives to each other. For example, consider the following degree questions:

(27) a. te ts^{h}opa **ʂə** ɛ?
it how long ITRG
b. te ts^{h}opa **ya-ʂə** ɛ?
it how ya-long ITRG
'How long is it?'

(28) a. te ts^{h}opa **dz̩odz̩o** ɛ?
it how short ITRG
b. te ts^{h}opa **ya-dz̩odz̩o** ɛ?
it how ya-short ITRG
'How short is it?'

For the degree question in (27a), all the other three constructions are considered as M-alternatives to (27a) since they are all at least as informative as (27a), and vice versa, (27a) counts an M-alternative to all the other three sentences. Meanwhile, (27a) is less complex than all the other three sentences. Therefore, the use of (27b), (28a), or (28b) will always give rise to the atypicality inference, since there exists a less complex M-alternative, namely (27a). It follows that (27b), (28a), and (28b) should receive an evaluative interpretation. This correctly predicts that the degree question in (27a) is non-evaluative, but (27b) and (28a) are evaluative. Similar to the case of negative-antonym positive constructions, since (28a) is a less

complex M-alternative to (28b) (given an evaluative reading), (28b) is not used. This accounts for the avoidance of the *ya*-prefixed form in negative-antonym equatives too.

In summary, with the proposed analysis which incorporates the anti-monosyllabic DegP rule and markedness competition, the distribution of *ya* and evaluativity are accounted for as an interplay of formal and semantic competitions. The analysis correctly predicts the rise of the evaluative reading in positive-antonym degree questions and negative-antonym comparatives, where a morphologically more marked form is available. It also provides an explanation of why a *ya*-prefixed form is absent in negative-antonym constructions, whereas a less marked form receives an evaluative reading.

However, there is one remaining puzzle, namely that while both the unprefixed and *ya*-prefixed form are allowed in positive-antonym equatives, the use of the *ya*-prefixed form does not seem to give rise to an evaluative reading. In the next section, I discuss this seemingly counterexample of the analysis. I suggest that, if we are on the right track, the example may actually occur as evidence that the atypicality inference is not always manifested as evaluativity as suggested by Rett (2015).

4. Further discussion: no variation in evaluativity

I have shown that how Ersu presents itself as a near perfect example of "marked form marked meaning" with its degree constructions. It shows two formal markedness hierarchies (i.e., positive vs. negative antonyms and unprefixed vs. *ya*-prefixed forms) and their interaction with evaluativity. It, however, does have one exceptional case that falls out of this generalization and requires extra explanation, namely positive-antonym equatives.

The analysis predicts that, as both the unprefixed and *ya*-prefixed form are available, the *ya*-prefixed form is predicted to carry the atypicality inference, hence receive the evaluative reading. Yet, the sentence is reported to be acceptable in a context that is incompatible with an evaluative reading.

(29) ida təwo ssyida dapa **ʂə/ya-ʂə**, jane ida la ssyida niugua **dzᵚodzᵚo**.
bed this bench reach long/ya-long but bed and bench both short
'This bed equals the bench in length, but they are both short.'

In fact, this is not the only one exception. In degree *wh*-exclamatives, both the unprefixed form and the *ya*-prefixed form are allowed, yet both constructions are evaluative (cf. positive constructions).

(30) ssyida tsʰo-pa **(ya-)ʂə**!
bench how ya-long
'How long the bench is!'

I suggest that the empirical data in which the use of a more marked form does not necessarily lead to the evaluative reading are indicative of a different treatment of the atypicality inference. In particular, Rett (2015) distinguishes between typical and atypical predication of gradable adjectives such that the atypical predication of a gradable adjective like 'tall' or 'short' excludes individuals in the extension gap of 'neither tall or short', i.e., those of average height. She suggests that in the case of application of a gradable predicate, to be atypical is to instantiate that predicate to not be in the extension gap, i.e., to an average degree. This 'not of average tall/short' is further strengthened to "taller taller than average" and "shorter than average", depending on which end of the scale is more informative given the ordering the adjective is associated with. This account predicts that when an adjectival construction is associated with an implicature that strengthens its meaning, it is strengthened from a typical extension to an atypical one. In other words, the atypicality inference associated with the marked form, namely that the content is atypical, is manifested as instantiating the gradable predicate atypically, hence the argument is put in an atypical, strengthened extension, giving rise to evaluativity.

One possible solution for the absence of the evaluative reading in Ersu marked positive-antonym equatives is thus one that relies on a different consideration of the atypicality inference. I suggest that, at least in Ersu, the atypicality inference should be considered (at least) with respect to the gradable predicate at DegP, instead of just the gradable adjective *per se*. Hence, saying that the content is atypical does not necessarily suggests that the instantiation of the gradable adjective is atypical. In particular, in marked positive-antonym equatives, it is the gradable predicate at DegP, which contains the information of both

the equative operator and the gradable adjective (e.g. *dapa ya-ʂə* 'equals in length') that is considered as atypical. What it means that a gradable predicate like 'equals in height' is atypical? I propose that an atypical interpretation of equative is that the equation is one that involves an atypical predication of equality, namely the degree of closeness. Hence, the marked one of the positive-antonym pair does not give rise to an evaluative reading, but one that indicates a more exact equation.

5. Concluding remarks

In this study, I argue that the distribution of the *ya-* morpheme in Ersu is governed both by the anti-monosyllabic DegP rule and markedness competitions. I have shown that Ersu presents two kinds of formal markedness hierarchies regarding its gradable predicates that are distinct from English. It must be taken into consideration both the competition between positive and negative antonyms and the one between the unprefixed and *ya-*prefixed forms in order to account for the distribution of *ya-* and evaluativity in Ersu degree constructions.

The data presented in this paper also bring a challenge to current theories of evaluativity (Rett 2008, 2015) which predict that a marked degree construction always receives a marked evaluative reading. I suggest that the atypicality inference which is considered as the source of evaluativity in Rett 2015 may be calculated relative to the DegP such that the atypical interpretation of an equative may be one that expresses a higher degree of closeness, instead of the positive predication of the standard. I leave the formalization of this idea for future research.

Overall, the Ersu degree system provides a case study of markedness competition and its interaction with morphosyntactic constraints. The findings from this study contribute to our understanding of how formal and semantic markedness align. Future research could apply these insights to other Tibeto-Burman languages, such as Duoxu (Chirkova & Han 2016) and Lizu (Chirkova 2019), to further explore the diversity of these linguistic phenomena.

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