
Intensifier Adjective Constructions in Sinitic Languages from a Typological Perspective



Ting Zhang
Shenzhen University
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
3 June 2025



Content



1. Overview and Definition



2. Intensifier Adjective Construction



3. Evolution and Motivation



4. Conclusion & Discussion

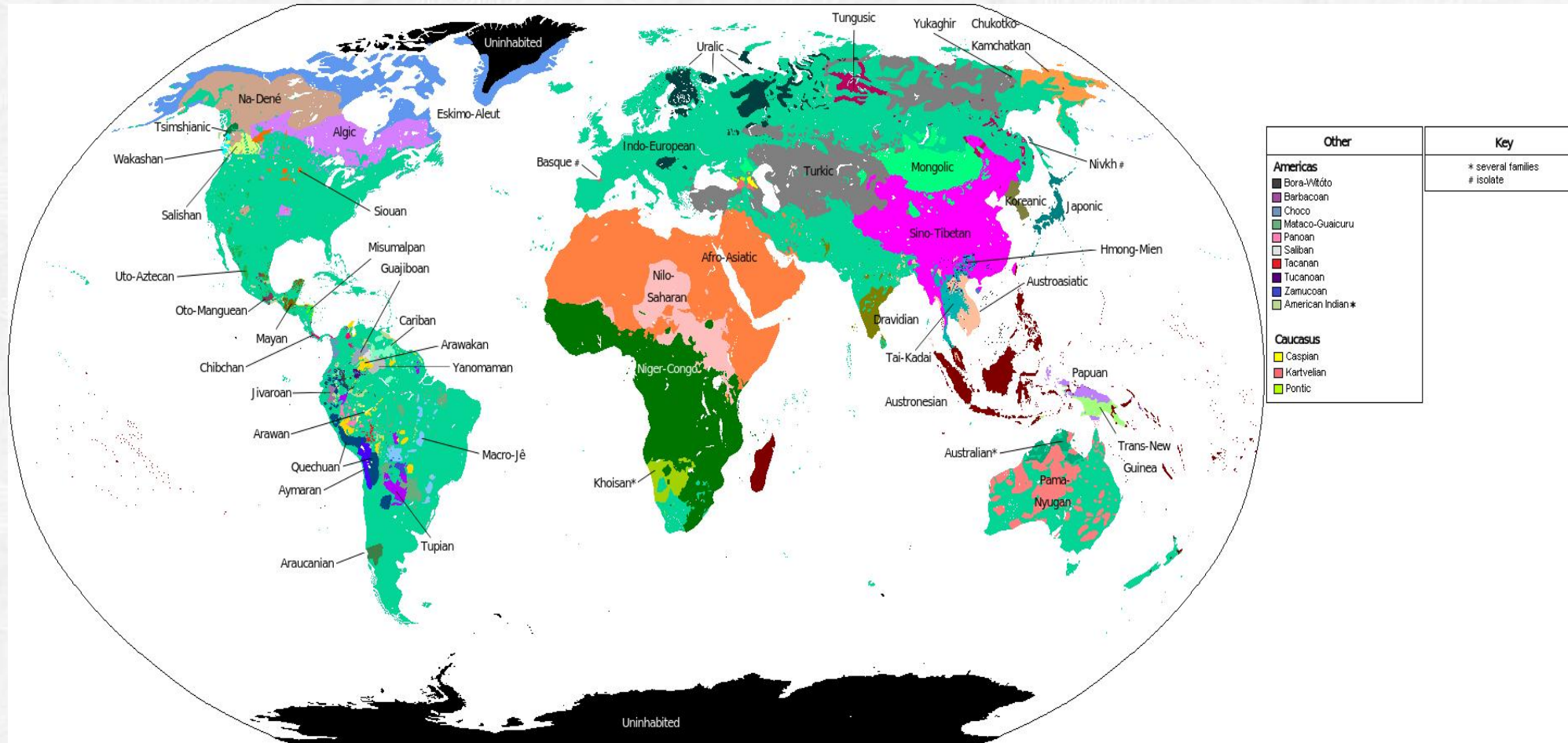


5. References

1. Overview and Definition

1.1 Overview of Sinitic Languages

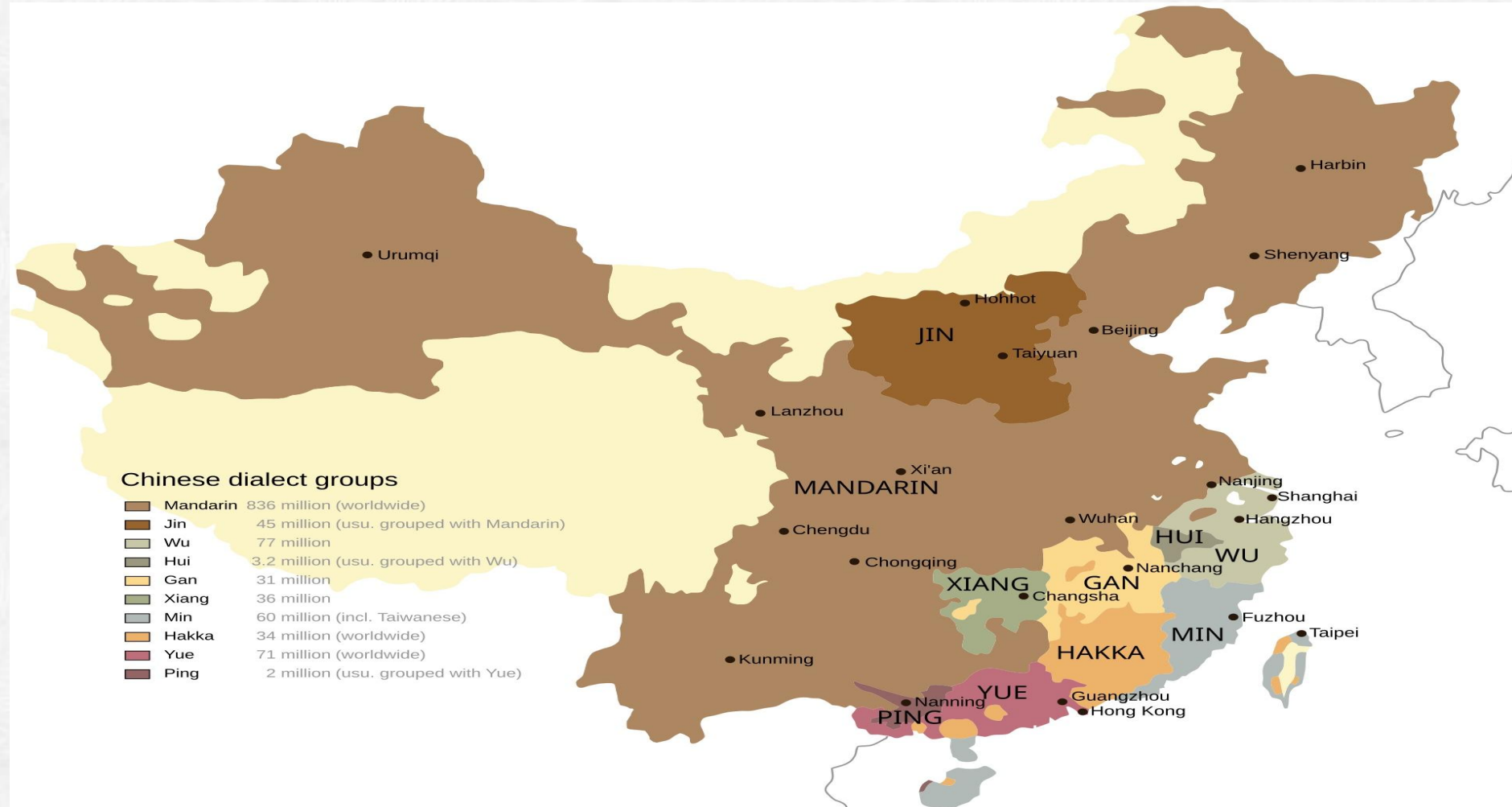
- Sino-Tibetan Language Family



1. Overview and Definition

1.1 Overview of Sinitic Languages

- Main Groups



- By Wyunhe - File:Map of sinitic dialect (Simplified Chinese).svg, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15168537>

1. Overview and Definition

1.2 Intensifier adjective construction in Sinitic languages

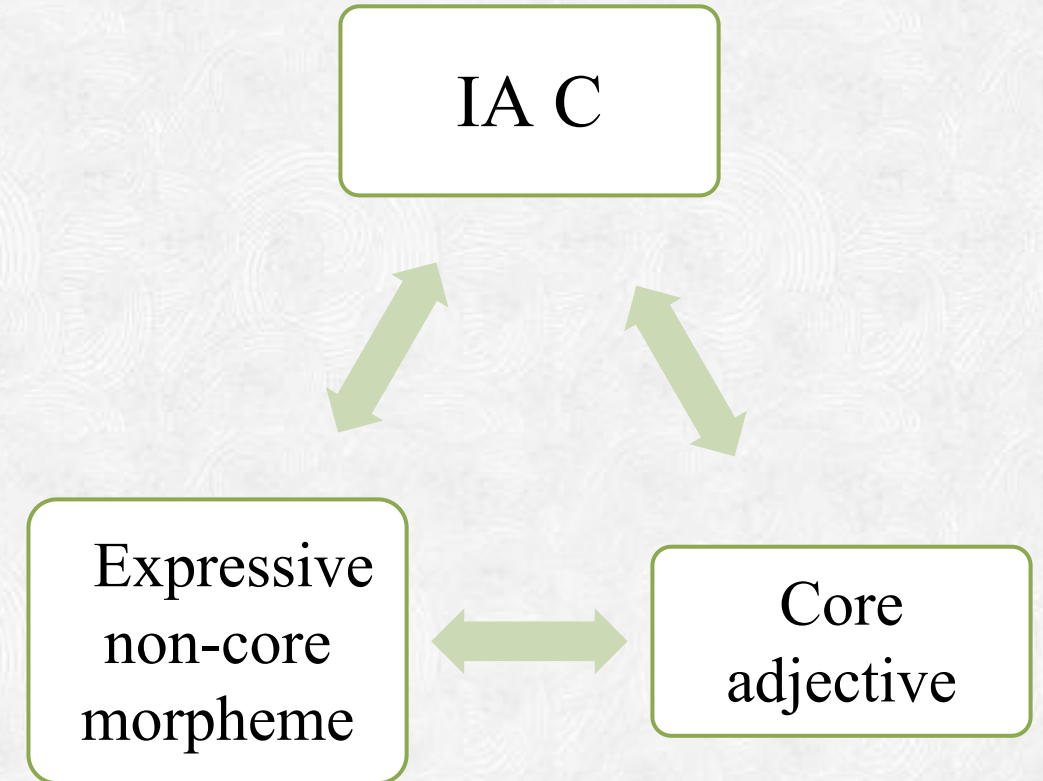
➤ Definition

- Construction:

Core adjective + Expressive non-core morpheme.

- Primary function:

Intensifying the overall depiction



1. Overview and Definition

1.3 Methodology

➤ Sources of Intensifier Constructions

- Linguistic Gazetteer of Regional Dialects
- Published Literatures
- Sinitic Languages Data Collection

➤ Annotation in Linguistic Atlases

➤ Annotation are based on the cited materials:

- IPA
- Chinese Characters (original characters, homophones)
- ? (untraceable lexical source)

?

1. Overview and Definition

1.4 Geographical Distribution

- Widespread in Xiang, Gan, Hakka, and Hui dialects along the Yangtze River.
- Found in Northeast Mandarin, Jilu Mandarin, and Jiaoliao Mandarin, with sparse occurrences in Wu, Min, and Yue dialects.



2. Intensifier Adjective Construction

2.1 Forms

➤ Basic Form in Sinitic Languages

Characters	雪白	绯红	飞快
IPA	ɕi ⁴⁵ po ⁴⁵	fī ⁴⁴ xon ³⁵	fei ⁴² khuɛ ³³
Literal translation	snow white	crimson red	fly fast
Free translation	very white	very red	very fast
Languages	Yiyang (Xiang)	Yongxing (Gan)	Qingyang (Jianghuai Mandarin)

2. Intensifier Adjective Construction

2.1 Forms

➤ Variants in sinitic languages

Characters	嫩 笋	滑 ʃan ²¹ ʃan ²¹	焦焦 糊	屙莫烂 脆
Literal translation	tender bamboo	slip ?	? scorched burnt (of food)	? crisp
Free translation	very tender	very slippery	very burnt	very crispy
Languages	Xinhua (Xiang)	Guangzhou (Yue)	Suining (Xi'nan Mandarin)	Ningbo (Wu)

2 . Intensifier Adjective Construction

2.2 Classification of Non-core morpheme (Synchronic)

➤ Part of speech

- Noun/Adjective/Verb/?
- No fixed categorization of Part of speech (5th-3rd centuries BC)

➤ Semantic meaning

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------------|--|--|
| ● Traceable lexical source | ┌
├
└ | Near synonym | 绯(crimson)红(red) | 乌(dark)黑(dark) |
| | | Metaphor | 笔(brush)直(straight) | 铁(iron)硬(hard) |
| | | Onomatopoeic | 崩(beng)脆(crisp) | |
| ● Untraceable lexical source | | Others | 蛇(ſio³⁵)酸(sour) | ? (phan³⁴)烫 (hot) |

2 . Intensifier Adjective Construction

2.3 Analogy > Schema (Diachronic)

- random co-occurrence of two words
- sporadic usage of this construction
- systematic construction.

(1) 形 容 枯 槁, 面 目 鰥 黑。

shape-appearance withered-emaciated, face-eyes sallow-black and dark

It describes a person who is very gaunt and tired. (The Strategies of Qin from Zhan Guo Ce, 206 BCE – 9 CE)

(2) 银环 鬓 边 冒 汗, 脸 色 彤 红。

Yínhuán temple-side emit-sweat, face-color red-red .

Sweat drips from Yínhuáns temples, and her face is very red. (Wildfire Spring Wind Fights Ancient City, 1958)

2 . Intensifier Adjective Construction

2.3 Analogy > Schema

➤ Phonological Features

Elongation

fien²¹ > fie:n²¹ hong (Jiangxi Wucheng: Gan)

Tone Shift (33-45)

mi³³ > mi⁴⁵ ɕi¹³ (Hunan Yiyang: Xiang)

➤ Basic Form:

Based on Jackendoff (2002).

$$[[a]_{Xk} [b]_{Ai}]_{Aj} \longleftrightarrow [SEM_i \text{ with relation } R \text{ to } SEM_k]_j$$

- $X \in \{N/ V/ A.....\}$
- b (Target adjective) Determining the category of the construction (Adj).
- a (source element) providing imagery, states, or other semantic content.
- R (semantic relation between a and b) e.g.sensory association or near-synonymy.

Variants: [x x A_i]A_j / [..... A_i]A_j

2 . Intensifier Adjective Construction

2.4 Other Languages

➤ **Constructions** (Based on Hendrikx, I., Van Goethem, K., Meunier, F., & Hiligsmann, P. (2017))

(1) ADV + ADJ ↔ AP (Syntactic level)

(2) PREF + ADJ ↔ ADJ (Word level)

(3) N + ADJ ↔ ADJ (Word level)

.....

- **French**

très bien ‘very good’, tout joli ‘all pretty’,

archiplein ‘extremely full’, extra-fort ‘extra strong’

Riegel et al. (1994: 620,621)

2 . Intensifier Adjective Construction

2.4 Other Languages

- **Dutch**

aartslui ‘lit.arch-lazy; very lazy’

superchic ‘super fancy’

overaardig ‘lit. over-nice;extremely nice’,

Geerts et al.(1984: 748/346-347;E-ANS 12.4.2.2.2))

- **German**

arschkalt ‘ass-cold’; ‘really cold’

ameisenklein ‘ant-small’; ‘as small as an ant’

erzdumm ‘really stupid’

James M. Stratton (2020:187)

- **Thai**

k^hɛŋ²¹⁵ t^hu:⁵¹ ‘very hard’

jai²¹bə²¹rə⁵¹ ‘very big’

XU Rui-juan, WANG Yi-jin (2018:96)

3. Evolution and Motivation

3.1 Three Types of Intensifier Construction

➤ Criteria

- **Semantic Meaning**: Semantic transparency/Semantic opacity
- **Independent usability**: Lexical independence
Construction independence
- **Productivity**: Productivity of analogy/Productivity of construction
- **Lexical traceability**: whether it can be traced back to an identifiable lexical source.

3. Evolution and Motivation

3.1 Three Types of Intensifier Construction

Type A	Type B	Type C
• Complete semantic meanings; • Independent usage; • Productivity; • Identifiable original characters	• Semantic bleaching (non-core adjective); • Dependent usage; • Conventionalized; • Traceable/Untraceable lexical source	• Complete semantic bleaching (non-core adjective); • Independent usage; • High productivity; • Untraceable lexical source
滚 ‘boiling/steaming of water’ 烫 ‘hot water’ 滚烫 ‘burning hot’ (Wuhu:Jianghuai Mandarin)	笔 ‘brush’ 直 ‘straight’ 笔直 ‘perfectly straight’ 劈直、壁直…… (Yiyang:Xiang)	飞 ‘fly’ 脆 ‘crisp’ 飞脆 ‘very crisp’ 飞薄 ‘very thin’…… (Ji Nan:Jilu Mandarin)

3. Evolution and Motivation

3.2 Evolution process

➤ Pathway of Evolution

Type A Semantic layering

Semi-Lexicalization



Type B Conventionalized



Semi-Grammaticalization

Type C Intensifier marker

➤ Examples

稀疏 (sparsity scatter-sparse)

稀烂 (sparsity rotten) 稀松 (sparsity loose)

稀碎 (sparsity broken).

稀酥 (sparsity crisp)

稀嫩 (sparsity tender).....

Note: Phonological changes may occur during the process, though the exact timing remains uncertain.

3. Evolution and Motivation

3.3 Preliminary Motivation

- **Frequency**
- **Need of new forms**
- **Language Contact**
- **Principle of Maximum Utilization**
 - maximizing the use of **highly activatable and easily accessible items**

4. Conclusion und Discussion

➤ Intensifier adjective construction

Core adjective + Expressive non-core morpheme $\longrightarrow$ **Intensifier function**

$$[[a]_{Xk} [b]_{Ai}]_{Aj} \longleftrightarrow [SEM_i \text{ with relation } R \text{ to } SEM_k]_j$$

➤ Evolution process of Non-core morpheme

Type A $\longrightarrow$ Type B $\longrightarrow$ Type C

➤ Motivation

- Frequency
- Need of new forms
- Maximum Utilization
- Language Contact

5. References

- Baayen, R. H. (2009). Corpus linguistics in morphology: Morphological productivity. In A. Lüdeling & M. Kytö (Eds.), *Corpus linguistics: An international handbook* (pp. 900–917). Berlin / New York: De Gruyter.
- Booij, G., & Hüning, M. (2014). Affixoids and constructional idioms. In *Extending the scope of Construction Grammar* (pp. 77–105).
- Croft, W. (2003). *Typology and universals*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cysouw, M. (2006). [Review of the book *Pronouns*, by D. N. S. Bhat]. *Journal of Linguistics*, 42(3), 697–703.
- Hendrikx, I., Van Goethem, K., Meunier, F., & Hiligsmann, P. (2017). Language-specific tendencies towards morphological or syntactic constructions: A corpus study on adjective intensification in L1 Dutch, L1 French and L2 Dutch. *Nederlandse Taalkunde*, 22(3), 389–420.
- Himmelmann, N. P. (2004). Lexicalization and grammaticization: Opposite or orthogonal? In [No volume title] (pp. 21–42). [n.p.].
- Jackendoff, R. (2002). English particle constructions, the lexicon, and. In *Interface explorations* (p. 67). [n.p.].

5. References

- Lehmann, C. (1985). Grammaticalization: Synchronic variation and diachronic change (Vol. 20, pp. 303–318). [n.p.].
- Liu, D. (2001). Renewal, reinforcement, and superposition in grammaticalization. *Linguistic Research*, 2, 71–81.
[刘丹青. (2001). 语法化中的更新, 强化与叠加. 语言研究, 2, 71–81.]
- Liu, D. (2014). On the maximum utilization principle of language inventory. *Studies of the Chinese Language*, 5, 387–401. [刘丹青. (2014). 论语言库藏的物尽其用原则. 中国语文, 5, 387–401.]
- Marcu, R., et al. (2018). Human organ-specific endothelial cell heterogeneity. *iScience*, 4, 20–35.
- Schachter, P., & Shopen, T. (1985). Parts-of-speech systems. In *Language typology and syntactic description* (Vol. 1, pp. 3–61).
- Stratton, J. M. (2020). Adjective intensifiers in German. *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, 32(2), 183–215.

Thanks for your attention



Vielen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit

感谢垂听 敬请指正

