

Comparatives and Other Degree Constructions

PLIN0020 Advanced Semantic Theory

Yasutada Sudo

31 October 2019

Comparatives in English

Comparatives in English

(1) The bed is longer [than it is wide]

- ▶ A comparative adjective is marked by *-er* or *more* in English.
- ▶ In (1) *than* seems to be embedding a clause.

Comparatives in English

(1) The bed is longer **er** [**than** it is wide]

- ▶ A comparative adjective is marked by *-er* or *more* in English.
- ▶ In (1) *than* seems to be embedding a clause.

Suppletion: the comparative of *many/much* is *more*.

(2) John has **more** CDs [**than** I have books].

Than-Clause and Movement

Bresnan (1973) pointed out that something seems to be moving inside the *than*-clause, because it's island sensitive.

(3) The bed is longer_{er} [_{than} it is wide]

(4) The bed is longer_{er} [_{than} she thinks [it is wide]]

Than-Clause and Movement

Bresnan (1973) pointed out that something seems to be moving inside the *than*-clause, because it's island sensitive.

(3) The bed is longer_{er} [_{than} it is wide]

(4) The bed is longer_{er} [_{than} she thinks [it is wide]]

(5) a. *The bed is longer_{er} [_{than} it is [yellow and wide].]

b. *The bed is longer_{er} [_{than} there is a customer [who thinks that it is wide]]

c. *The bed is longer_{er} [_{than} because it is wide I won't fit in my room]

Than-Clause and Ellipsis

Various types of ellipsis are observed in *than*-clauses.

(6) I am taller than [John is ~~tall~~]

(7) Paul ate more cookies than [Sophie ~~ate~~ candies]

(8) Paul has more money than [~~it~~ is necessary]

Phrasal Comparatives

(9) Paul is taller than [John is ~~tall~~]

(10) Paul is taller than John

There's a debate in the theoretical literature as to whether (10) is derived from (9) by deleting *is*.

I think there is enough reason to think that (10) is a separate construction, but there doesn't seem to be a consensus.

Phrasal Comparatives (cont.)

Not all phrasal comparatives are reducible to clausal ones.

(11) a. *Paul is taller than me am.

b. Paul is taller than me.

(12) a. *Paul cannot be more stupid than himself is.

b. Paul cannot be more stupid than himself.

(13) a. *Paul is taller than 6 feet is.

b. Paul is taller than 6 feet.

(14) a. *Paul is taller than none of the girls is.

b. Paul is taller than none of the girls.

More on Comparatives

Other ways of expressing comparison:

- (15) a. Compared to John, Paul is tall.
b. Paul is tall. John isn't.

The comparative construction allows for **differential phrases**:

- (16) a. Paul is **5 cm** taller than John (is).
b. That building is **three times** taller than this one (is).

Equatives

Equatives in English are syntactically the same as comparatives, except that instead of *more...than...*, you see *as...as....*

- (17) a. John is as tall as Paul (is).
b. This building is twice as tall as that one (is).

NB: You cannot have a non-multiplicative differential phrase:

- (18)*This building is 5 m as tall as that one (is).

Other Degree Constructions

(19) *Excessives*

- a. John is **too** tall [to sleep in this bed]
- b. John is **too** tall [for this bed]

Other Degree Constructions

(19) *Excessives*

- a. John is **too** tall [to sleep in this bed]
- b. John is **too** tall [for this bed]

(20) *Enough*

- a. John is short **enough** [to sleep in this bed]
- b. John is short **enough** [for this bed]

Other Degree Constructions

(19) *Excessives*

- a. John is **too** tall [to sleep in this bed]
- b. John is **too** tall [for this bed]

(20) *Enough*

- a. John is short **enough** [to sleep in this bed]
- b. John is short **enough** [for this bed]

(21) *Superlative*

- a. John is the tall**est** rugby player.
- b. Paul bought the **most** expensive guitar.
- c. This is the long**est** title yet.

Measure Phrase Constructions

Some unmarked gradable adjectives can take measure phrases, while others can't.

- (22) a. John is **6 feet** tall.
b. The lake is **30 m** deep.
c. John is **10 min** late.
d. Paul is **5 months** old.
- (23) a. *John is **70 kg** heavy.
b. *The car is **50 km/h** fast.
c. *John is **one million dollars** rich
d. *The water is **30 degrees** warm/hot.
e. *The book is **\$10** expensive.

In German and Dutch, some of (23) are grammatical (see e.g. Schwarzschild 2005).

Note that the comparatives of (23) are acceptable.

Comparatives in Other Languages

Greek

Greek is a language that marks comparatives involving clauses (**clausal comparatives**) and comparatives involving phrases (**phrasal comparatives**) clearly.

(24) i Maria pezi kithara kalitera **apo** [ton
the.nom Maria plays guitar better than [the.acc
Gianni]
Giannis
'Maria plays guitar better than Giannis'

(25) i Maria pezi kithara kalitera **ap'oti** [pezi
the.nom plays guitar better than [plays guitar
kithara o Giannis]
the.nom Giannis]
'Maria plays guitar better than Giannis does'

Greek Ellipsis

Greek allows ellipsis of clausal comparatives:

(26) i Maria pezi kithara kalitera **apo** [ton Gianni]
the.nom Maria plays guitar better than [the.acc Giannis]
'Maria plays guitar better than Giannis'

(27) i Maria pezi kithara kalitera **ap'oti** [o
the.nom Maria plays guitar better than [the.nom
Giannis]
Giannis]
'Maria plays guitar better than Giannis does'

So some languages have both phrasal and clausal comparatives.

Maybe English phrasal comparatives are ambiguous.

Russian

Russian is like Greek, except that the phrasal comparative has no *than*.

(28) Ja ljublju Ivana bol'she [Maši]
I love Ivan more than Masha.gen
'I love Ivan more than Masha'

(29) Ja ljublju Ivana bol'she **čem** [jego ljubit
I love Ivan more what.instr [him loves
Maša]
Masha.nom]
'I love Ivan more than Masha does'

Japanese

Japanese lacks a word for *more/-er*. What corresponds to *than* is *yor*.

- (30) Paul-wa John-**yor** kasikoi.
Paul-top John-than smart
'Paul is smarter than John'

Japanese does not allow simple clausal comparatives.

- (31)*Paul-wa [John-ga (kasikoi)]-**yor** kasikoi
Paul-top [John-nom (smart)]-than smart
(intended) 'Paul is smarter than John is'
- (32)*tsukue-wa [hondana-ga hobahiroi]-**yor** nagai
desk-top [bookshelf-nom wide]-than long
(intended) 'The desk is longer than the bookshelf is wide'

Japanese (cont.)

Japanese might seem to lack clausal comparatives, but:

(33)*Paul-wa [John-ga (kasikoi)]-**yor**i kasikoi
Paul-top [John-nom (smart)]-than smart
(intended) ‘Paul is smarter than John is’

(34) Paul-wa [John-ga omotteiru]-**yor**i kasikoi
Paul-top [John-nom think]-**yor**i smart
‘Paul is smarter than John thinks’

The theoretical debate:

- ▶ Japanese only has phrasal comparatives, and what looks like clausal comparatives are underlyingly phrasal (Beck, Oda & Sugisaki 2004, Sudo 2015).
- ▶ Japanese has clausal comparatives but their distributions are different from English (Bhatt & Takahashi 2011, Shimoyama 2012).

Hindi-Urdu

Hindi-Urdu is similar to Japanese (all the data are from Bhatt & Takahashi 2011).

- (35) John Bill-se zyaadaa lambaa hai
 John Bill-than more tall is
 ‘John is taller than Bill’

Hindi never allows a clause as a complement of *-se* (meaning ‘from’), which is a postpositional suffix for a nominal, and cannot attach to a predicate.

A clausal complement is bad even with ellipsis:

- (36) *Tina-ne aaj [Pim kal]-se zyaadaa kitaabẽ
 Tina-erg today [Pim yesterday]-than more books
 piṛhĩ:
 read
 (intended) ‘Tina read more books today than Pim
 yesterday’

Hindi-Urdu Correlatives

Hindi expresses clausal comparatives with *correlatives*.

- (37) [Pim-ne kal jitnii kitaabẽ paṛhĩ]
[Pim-erg yesterday how.many books read]
Tina-ne aaj us-se zyaadaa kitaabẽ paṛhĩ:
Tina-erg today that-than more books read
'Tina read more books today than Pim did
yesterday'

Mandarin Chinese

Mandarin Chinese is relatively well discussed in the literature.

- (38) Yuēhàn bi Mǎlì gāo
John BI Mary tall
'John is taller than Mary' (Erlewine 2018)

Clausal constructions are generally ungrammatical.

- (39)*Zhe ge zhuozi bi nage men kuan de gao.
the cl table BI the door wide DE high
'The table is higher than the door is wide.'
(Beck et al. 2009)

Motu

Motu is a language that uses simple conjunction to express comparatives.

- (40) Mary na lata, to Frank na kwadoḡi
Mary is tall, but Frank is short
'Mary is taller than Frank' (Beck et al. 2009)

But this entails that Frank is short.

And apparently there are no (related) ways to express:

- (41) a. Mary is taller than 170 cm.
b. Mary is 5 cm taller than Frank is.

Yoruba

Yoruba uses *exceed* (the data are from Beck et al. 2009).

(42) Ade ga jo Isaac lo
Ade tall exceed Isaac go
'Ade is taller than Isaac'

(43) Owó osù rẹ ju ti ẹ lọ
money month her exceed that your go
'Her income exceeds your income'

Japanese Excessives

Japanese expresses excessives with the verb *sugiru* 'exceed'.

(44) John-wa kasiko-sugiru
John-top smart-exceed
'John is too smart.'

See Nakanishi (2004) for an analysis.

References

- ▶ Beck, Krasikova, Fleischer, Gergel, Hofstetter, Savelsberg, Vanderelst & Villalta (2009) Crosslinguistic variation in comparative constructions. *Linguistic Variation Yearbook* 9.
- ▶ Beck, Oda & Sugisaki (2004) Parametric variation in the semantics of comparison: Japanese vs. English. *JEAL*, 13.
- ▶ Bhatt & Takahashi (2011) Reduced and unreduced phrasal comparatives. *NLLT*, 29.
- ▶ Erlewine (2018) Clausal comparison without degree abstraction in Mandarin Chinese. *NLLT*, 36.
- ▶ Schwarzschild (2005) Measure phrases as modifiers of adjectives. *Recherches linguistiques de Vincennes*, 34.
- ▶ Sudo (2015) Hidden nominal structures in Japanese clausal comparatives. *JEAL*, 24.