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English comparison constructions in a typological perspective

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1. Introduction

- Comparison and assessments of similarity and difference are fundamental cognitive processes

- Vast amount of literature on the expression of comparison
  - From a typological (cross-linguistic) perspective
  - In formal frameworks (especially on European languages)

- Lacking: Good corpus studies of the expression of comparison in little-known, oral languages
Structure of the talk

- Terminology
- Comparison of inequality
  - Comparison of (relative) superiority
    - English vs. worldwide
  - Comparison of absolute superiority / superlativity
    - English vs. worldwide
- Comparison of equality
  - English vs. worldwide
- Comparison of similarity
  - English vs. worldwide
2. Terminology
A terminological issue

What is a “comparative” construction?
- A construction expressing comparison?
- A construction expressing comparison of inequality?
- A construction expressing comparison of superiority?
- A construction expressing comparison of relative superiority?

→ Pay attention to the terminology used in different scientific works
Constituents of comparison constructions

*Mary is tall-er than John*

- **C** Comparee: Entity which is being compared (*Mary*) against some standard of comparison
- **S** Standard of comparison: Entity that the comparee is compared against (*John*)
- **P** Parameter of comparison: Property (quality, quantity) (*tall*)
- **SM** Standard marker: Marker indicating the grammatical function of the standard (*than*)
- **DM** Degree/parameter marker: Marker marking the degree of presence or absence of a property in the comparee (*-er*)

⚠️ We find a lot of different terms for these constituents in the literature. Don’t get confused! Not all languages use a standard and a degree marker in their comparative constructions.
Traditional degrees of comparison

In traditional grammar, four (three) degrees of comparison of the adjective are distinguished.

(NB: Label for the morphological form of the adjective > Label for the whole comparison construction)

- **Positive** degree (basic form of the adjective): *Mary is tall.*
- **(Equative** degree (same extent): *Mary is as tall as John.*)
- **Comparative** degree (different extent): *Mary is taller than Peter.*
- **Superlative** degree (highest extent): *Mary is the tallest of her family.*
Traditional degrees of comparison

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- **Positive** degree (basic form of the adjective): *Mary is tall.*
- **Comparative** degree (different extent): *Mary is taller than Peter.*
- **Superlative** degree (highest extent): *Mary is the tallest of her family.*
- **Q:** Are there languages which also mark equative degree synthetically on ADJ?

Analytic/free

Synthetic/bound

Synthetic/bound
Constituents of comparison constructions

Synthetic (morphological) degree marking, e.g. North Saami (Norway, Finland)*

- **Positive** degree: gievra ‘strong’
- **Equateive** degree: gievrru ‘as strong’
- **Comparative** degree: gievrrat ‘stronger’
- **Superlative** degree: gievrramus ‘strongest’

(see also Celtic languages)

*for 11 adjectives of the basic vocabulary
Source: Ylikoski (2017: 271)
Carving up the domain of comparison

Quantitative comparison (parameter of comparison overtly expressed)

- **INEQUALITY**
  - Superiority
    - Relative Superiority  
      - Mary is taller than Peter  
      - Comparative
    - Absolute Superiority (superlativity)  
      - Mary is the tallest of her family  
      - Superlative
  - Inferiority
    - Relative Inferiority  
      - Susan is less tall than Peter
    - Absolute Inferiority (superlativity)  
      - Susan is the least tall of her family

- **EQUALITY**
  - Mary is as tall as John  
  - Equative

Qualitative comparison → see next page

Cf. Fuchs (2014)
Carving up the domain of comparison

... 

**Qualitative comparison** (similarity)

- (Real) Similarity
  
  *Peter runs like a hare. / Peter is like Mary.*

- Hypothetical Similarity (Simulation)
  
  *Peter behaves as if he were a child.*

*Similative*

*Simplative*

(no established term)

Cf. Fuchs (2014)
More on terminology

Predicative construction

◦ Clausal
  ◦ *Mary is taller than Peter*

Attributive construction

◦ All constituents in one NP
  ◦ *[Even a brighter fellow than George] would shrink back from this talk.*
    (Stolz 2013: 9)
3. Comparison of inequality

3.1. RELATIVE SUPERIORITY / 3.2. ABSOLUTE SUPERIORITY
3.1. Comparison of (relative) superiority

*Mary is taller than Peter*

In the canonical English comparative construction (narrow sense of the word):

- Comparee: Nominative NP, Subject
- Standard: Accusative NP (see *She is taller than him*).
- Parameter: Adjective
- Degree/Parameter marker: *-er* or *more* (see *Mary is more modest than Peter*)
- Standard marker: Dedicated [!] comparative preposition (22/167 lgs in WALS)
3.1. Comparison of (relative) superiority

Crosslinguistically, comparative constructions can be categorised in a limited number of types (primarily based on the conceptual basis of the standard marker!).

- **SOURCE SCHEMA:** Peter is tall from Mary
- **LOCATION SCHEMA:** Peter is tall at Mary
- **GOAL SCHEMA:** Peter is tall to Mary
- **SEQUENCE SCHEMA:** Peter is tall, then Mary
- **SIMILARITY SCHEMA:** Peter is taller like Mary
- **TOPIC SCHEMA:** Peter and Mary, Peter is tall.
- **POLARITY SCHEMA:** Peter is tall, Mary is not tall.
- **ACTION SCHEMA:** Peter is tall surpasses Mary / surpasses Mary in bigness

*Cf. Stolz (2013), see also Dixon (2008), Stassen (1985), Heine (1997)*

*also subsumed under PARTICLE COMPARATIVE*
3.1. Comparison of (relative) superiority

**ACTION SCHEMA:** Peter is tall surpasses Mary / surpasses Mary in bigness
(33/167 languages in WALS)

- Nigerian Pidgin English

| À big pas yù. | À big pas yù. | 1SG.SBJ be.big surpass 2SG.OBJ | ‘I am bigger than you.’ |

3.1. Comparison of (relative) superiority

- **SOURCE SCHEMA:** Peter is tall from Mary (78/167 lgs in WALS locational schema)
- Kambaata (Cushitic, Ethiopia)

\[
\begin{align*}
Bóq & \{Makkeb-éechch\} & qeráa’rr-u-a \\
PN.mNOM & PN-fABI & long-mPRED-mCOP2
\end{align*}
\]

‘Boqe is taller than Makkeebe (lit. Boqe is tall \{from Makkeebe\}).’

- Juba Arabic (Creole, South Sudan)

| zaráf towil min fil | zaráf towil min fil | giraffe long from elephant | ‘The giraffe is taller than the elephant.’ |

Source: Michaelis, S.M. et al. (eds.) 2013
3.2. Comparison of (absolute) superiority

*Mary is the tallest (in the family / of the three).*

In the English superlative construction

- Degree/Parameter marker: *-est* or *most* (synthetic or analytic superlative)
- Superlative adjective is preceded by a definite article

*Marie est la plus intelligente.*

In the French superlative construction

- Degree/Parameter marker: *plus* (analytic comparative)
- Superlative adjective is preceded by a definite article
3.2. Comparison of (absolute) superiority

- Only one cross-linguistic study of superlatives (Gorshenin 2012): 6 major types
- “[S]ynthetic superlative forms of adjectivals, as they are observed in classical Indo-European languages [are] an almost exclusively Eurasian speciality” (p. 172)
- “The most widespread predicative superlative construction is based upon a comparative predication with the Standard of comparison expressed by or at least including some universal quantifier of the type all, everything/everybody (or a logically related pronoun, esp. an indefinite pronoun with general reference).” (p. 171, emphasis mine)
- Pseudo-English: Mary is taller than all [= Mary is the tallest]
4. Comparison of equality

*Mary is as tall as Peter*

In the English equative construction:

- Degree/Parameter marker: *as* (analytic)
- Standard marker of equative ≠ standard marker of comparative: *as ≠ than*
4. Comparison of equality

Haselmath (2017) distinguishes 6 primary equative schemas:

- **ONLY EQUATIVE SM:** Kim is tall [like Pat]
- **EQUATIVE DM AND SM:** Kim is [equally tall] [as Pat]
- **EQUATIVE DM UNIFIED:** [Kim and Pat] are [equally] tall
- **PRIMARY REACH EQUATIVE:** Kim [reaches/equal]s Pat] in height
- **PRIMARY REACH EQU. UNIFIED:** [Kim and Pat] are equal (to each other) in height
- **SECONDARY REACH EQUATIVE:** Kim is tall [reaching/equalling Pat]
4. Comparison of equality

Haselmath (2017) distinguishes 6 primary equative schemas:

- **ONLY EQUATIVE SM:**  
  *Kim is tall [like Pat]*

- **EQUATIVE DM AND SM:**  
  *Kim is [equally tall] [as Pat]*

- **EQUATIVE DM UNIFIED:**  
  *[Kim and Pat] are [equally] tall*

- **PRIMARY REACH EQUATIVE:**  
  *Kim [reaches/equals Pat] in height*

- **PRIMARY REACH EQU. UNIFIED:**  
  *[Kim and Pat] are equal (to each other) in height*

- **SECONDARY REACH EQUATIVE:**  
  *Kim is tall [reaching/equalling Pat]*

French translations:

- *Kim est aussi grande que Pat*
4. Comparison of equality

Only equative standard marker: *Kim is tall [like Pat]*

Kambaata (Cushitic, Ethiopia): =g ‘like’ (equative/similative)

{Zoobb-ée=g-a} xalig-á ik-kumbóochch
lions-mGEN=G-mACC/ACC strong-mACC be-2sNREL.ABL

urrr-ú’· kad-dókkont
frontyard-fACC-1sPOSS step-2sPREV
‘Unless you are strong *like* as strong {as lions}, don’t dare to step into my front yard!’

(K89: 6.124; corrected by DW)
4. Comparison of equality

Secondary reach equative: *Kim is tall [reaching/equalling Pat]*

Nigerian Pidgin English (Farasclas 1996: 109, quoted after Haspelmath 2017)

*Chinwe get sens rich yu.*
Chinwe have sense reach you.
‘Chinwe has as much sense as you.’
4. Comparison of similarity

*Mary is like Peter / Mary walks like Peter*

In the English similative construction:

- SM of similative ≠ SM of equative ≠ SM of comparative:
  
  *like ≠ as ≠ than*
4. Comparison of similarity

Cross-linguistically very common:

- SM of similative = SM of equative \(\neq\) SM of comparative
  
  e.g. German: \(wie = (so) \ldots wie \neq (...-er) als\)

French: \(comme \neq (aussi) \ldots que = (plus) \ldots que\)

- SM of similative = SM of equative \(\neq\) SM of comparative

German (Moselfranconian): \(wie = (so) \ldots wie = (...-er) \ldots wie\)

- SM of similative = SM of equative = SM of comparative
Questions

- Examine the whole domain of comparison/Do not only focus on comparative constructions in the narrow sense
- Examine primary (more common) and secondary (less common) constructions
- Examine not only predicative but also attributive constructions?
- Into which cross-linguistic schemas do the constructions of language X fit?
- Syntactic function of individual constituents in comparison constructions
- Degree markers and their sources and multifunctionalities/other functions outside of comparison constructions
- Standard markers and their sources and multifunctionalities/other functions outside of comparison constructions
- Parameters: Grammatical status/word class, restricted to lexemes that are considered gradable in the language?
- Possible diachronic origin of the comparative construction strategy (e.g. calques, borrowings from superstrate languages under language contact or areal diffusion of common patterns)
- Structural similarities between comparative constructions and other comparison constructions?
References

- Stolz, Thomas 2013. *Competing comparative constructions in Europe*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag