



English comparison constructions in a typological perspective

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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 **P** **DM** **SM** **S**

- 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

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.* Analytic/free
- **Comparative** degree (different extent): *Mary is taller than Peter.* Synthetic/bound
- **Superlative** degree (highest extent): *Mary is the tallest of her family.* Synthetic/bound
- **Q:** Are there languages which also mark equative degree synthetically on ADJ?

Constituents of comparison constructions

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

‘strong’

- **Positive** degree: *gievra*
- **Equative** 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
- Hypothetical Similarity (Simulation)

Peter runs like a hare. / Peter is like Mary.

Similative

Peter behaves as if he were a child.

Simulative*
(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!).

Pseudo-English translations!

- 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*
- (Pure comparative)

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

<i>À big pas yù.</i>	À big pas yù.	1SG.SBJ be.big surpass 2SG.OBJ	'I am bigger than you.'
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(Source: S.M: Michaelis and the APiCS Consortium. 2013. Comparative standard marking. In: Michaelis, S.M. et al. (eds.) Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures Online. Leipzig: MPI-EVA. <http://apics-online.info/parameters/42>)

3.1. Comparison of (relative) superiority

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

Bóq {*Makkeeb-éechch*} *qeráa'rr-u-a*
 PN.mNOM PN-fABI long-mPRED-mCOP2
 'Boqe is taller than Makkeebe (lit. Boqe is tall {from Makkeebe}).'

- Juba Arabic (Creole, South Sudan)

<i>zaráf towíl min fil</i>	zaráf towíl min fil	giraffe long from elephant	'The giraffe is taller than the elephant.'
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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 \neq standard marker of comparative:
as \neq *than*

4. Comparison of equality

Haspelmath (2017) distinguishes 6 primary equative schemas:

Pseudo-English translations!	◦ ONLY EQUATIVE SM:	<i>Kim is tall [like Pat]</i>	
	◦ EQUATIVE DM AND SM:	<i>Kim is [equally tall] [as Pat]</i>	English
	◦ EQUATIVE DM UNIFIED:	<i>[Kim and Pat] are [equally] tall</i>	
	◦ PRIMARY REACH EQUATIVE:	<i>Kim [reaches/equals Pat] in height</i>	
	◦ PRIMARY REACH EQU. UNIFIED:	<i>[Kim and Pat] are equal (to each other) in height</i>	
	◦ SECONDARY REACH EQUATIVE:	<i>Kim is tall [reaching/equalling Pat]</i>	

4. Comparison of equality

Haspelmath (2017) distinguishes 6 primary equative schemas:

Pseudo-English translations!	◦ ONLY EQUATIVE SM:	<i>Kim is tall [like Pat]</i>	French <i>Kim est aussi grande que Pat</i>
	◦ EQUATIVE DM AND SM:	<i>Kim is [equally tall] [as Pat]</i>	
	◦ EQUATIVE DM UNIFIED:	<i>[Kim and Pat] are [equally] tall</i>	
	◦ PRIMARY REACH EQUATIVE:	<i>Kim [reaches>equals Pat] in height</i>	
	◦ PRIMARY REACH EQU. UNIFIED:	<i>[Kim and Pat] are equal (to each other) in height</i>	
	◦ SECONDARY REACH EQUATIVE:	<i>Kim is tall [reaching/equalling Pat]</i>	

4. Comparison of equality

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

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

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

<i>urr-ú-'</i>	<i>kad-dókkooont</i>
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 (Faraclas 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 similitive construction:

- SM of similitive \neq SM of equative \neq SM of comparative:

like \neq as \neq than

4. Comparison of similarity

Cross-linguistically very common:

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

French: *comme* \neq (*aussi*) ... *que* = (*plus*) ... *que*

- SM of simulative = SM of equative \neq SM of comparative

German (Moselfranconian): *wie* = (*so*) ... *wie* = (...-er) ... *wie*

- SM of simulative = 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?

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