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# English comparison constructions in a typological perspective

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JOURNÉE MASTÉRIALE, 4 AVRIL 2017, U PICARDIE

# 1. Introduction

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- 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

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- 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

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# A terminological issue

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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

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*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

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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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(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

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

- |                              |                   |             |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
|                              |                   | ‘strong’    |
| ◦ <b>Positive</b> degree:    | <i>gievra</i>     |             |
| ◦ <b>Equative</b> degree:    | <i>gievrru</i>    | ‘as strong’ |
| ◦ <b>Comparative</b> degree: | <i>gievrrat</i>   | ‘stronger’  |
| ◦ <b>Superlative</b> degree: | <i>gievrramus</i> | ‘strongest’ |

(see also Celtic languages)

\*for 11 adjectives of the basic vocabulary  
Source: Ylikoski (2017: 271)

# Carving up the domain of comparison

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## **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

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...

## **Qualitative comparison** (similarity)

- (Real) Similarity *Peter runs like a hare. / Peter is like Mary.* **Simulative**
- Hypothetical Similarity (Simulation) *Peter behaves as if he were a child.* **Simulative\***  
(no established term)

Cf. Fuchs (2014)

# More on terminology

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## **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

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3.1. RELATIVE SUPERIORITY / 3.2. ABSOLUTE SUPERIORITY



## 3.1. Comparison of (relative) superiority

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*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

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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

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*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

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- 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

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

# 4. Comparison of equality

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  - 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  
*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

*urr-ú-’*                                      *kad-dókkooont*  
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

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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

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*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 similative = 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 similative = SM of equative  $\neq$  SM of comparative

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

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

# Questions

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- 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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