

The typology of comparative constructions revisited

category: oral

Stassen (1985) was one of the first monographs dealing with a grammatical phenomenon from a world-wide perspective, at least in the modern (post-Greenbergian) era. Stassen examined comparative constructions in a sample of 110 languages and found correlations with word-order and clause-combining features. A quarter of a century later the time seems ripe for a reassessment.

In this paper, we look at a sample of 300 languages from around the world which does not overlap with Stassen's (1985) sample, nor with the larger sample (167 languages) of his 2005 *WALS* chapter. This novel set of data allows us to replicate his findings on comparative constructions and their relationship to clausal word order (cf. Plank 2007 on replication in typology), and our results offer no major surprises. The major types identified by Stassen (especially the locational construction with its subtypes, the exceed construction, and the conjoined construction) recur widely in the languages of our sample, and the geographical trends seen in Stassen (2005) are largely confirmed. Our study is the first replication of a *WALS* chapter, as far as we know, and the fact that our findings do not differ greatly can be seen as support for the sampling approach adopted in *WALS* (if such support is needed).

However, our study goes beyond Stassen's work in a number of important ways. First, our classification is more fine-grained. Thus, we distinguish between two types of exceed constructions, the primary exceed construction ("Pat exceeds Kim in tallness"), where the exceed verb is the main predicate of the construction, and the secondary exceed construction ("Pat is tall exceeding Kim"), where the parameter of comparison is expressed as the main predicate. We also subdivide Stassen's locational type into an ablative type ("tall from Kim"), a locative type ("tall at Kim"), an allative type ("tall to Kim"), and a comitative type ("tall with Kim"). Especially the latter (comitative) type does not fit well into an overall "locational" macrotype. Within the conjoined ("double predication") macrotype, we distinguish between an antonym type ("Pat is tall, Kim is short"), a negative type ("Pat is tall, Kim is not tall"), and an increase type ("Kim is tall, Pat is very tall"). Not surprisingly, most of these subtypes are associated with specific clausal word order patterns. Stassen's "particle comparative" is not defined in such a way that the concept can be applied readily to any language (it involves a particular use of case), so we use a category "other standard marker" instead.

In addition to confirming some of Stassen's findings, we have also identified a number of new universals, e.g. no language lacks both a degree marker and a standard marker ("Pat is tall Kim"), and almost no language lacks a standard marker even when a degree marker is present ("Pat is tall-er Kim"). However, we also find that there is more diversity than is apparent from Stassen's rather simple, lumping typology. Quite a few languages do not easily fit into any of the types.