

## 121. Comparative Constructions

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### 1. Defining the construction

In semantic or cognitive terms, comparison can be defined as a mental act by which two objects are assigned a position on a predicative scale. If the positions on the scale are different, then we speak of **the comparison of inequality**, which finds its linguistic encoding in **comparative constructions**. Such a construction essentially involves three things: a predicative scale, which, in language, is usually encoded as a gradable predicate, and two objects. Although these objects can, in principle, be complex, the practice of typological linguistic research has been to restrict them to primary objects, which are typically encoded in the form of noun phrases. Thus, a comparative construction typically contains a predicate and two noun phrases, one of which is the object of comparison (**the comparee NP**), while the other functions as the "yardstick" of the comparison (**the standard NP**). In short, prototypical instances of comparative constructions in the languages of the world are sentences that are similar to the English sentence in (1), in which the noun phrase following the item *than* is the standard NP:

- (1) *John is taller than Lucy.*

### 2. Types of comparative constructions

Modern literature on the typology of the comparison of inequality includes Ultan 1972, Andersen 1983 and Stassen 1984, 1985. The last of these authors presents a typology of comparative constructions which boils down to four major

types. A basic parameter in this typology is the encoding of the standard NP. First, one can make a distinction between instances of **fixed-case comparatives** and **derived-case comparatives**. In the former type, the standard NP is always in the same case, regardless of the case of the comparee NP. In the latter type, the standard NP derives its case assignment from the case of the comparee NP. Classical Latin is an example of a language in which both types are allowed. The sentences in (2) illustrate a construction type in which the standard NP is dependent on the comparee NP for its case marking: it can either be in the nominative case (*tu*) or in the accusative case (*te*). In contrast, sentence (3) shows a construction type in which the standard NP is invariably in the ablative case (*te*). As a result, sentence (3) is ambiguous between the readings of (2a) and (2b).

(2) Classical Latin (Kühner and Stegmann 1955: 466)

- a. *Brutum ego non minus amo*  
 Brutus.ACC 1SG.NOM not less love.1SG.PRES  
*quam tu*  
 than 2SG.NOM  
 'I love Brutus no less than you (love Brutus).'
- b. *Brutum ego non minus amo*  
 Brutus.ACC 1SG.NOM not less love.1SG.PRES  
*quam te*  
 than 2SG.ACC  
 'I love Brutus no less than (I love) you.'

(3) Classical Latin (Kühner and Stegmann 1955: 466)

*Brutum ego non minus te amo*  
 Brutus.ACC 1SG.NOM not less 2SG.ABL love.1SG.PRES

Both types of comparative constructions can be subcategorized further, on the basis of additional parameters. Within the fixed-case comparatives, a first distinction is that

between **Exceed Comparatives** and **Locational Comparatives**. **Exceed Comparatives** have as their characteristic that the standard NP is constructed as the direct object of a transitive verb with the meaning ‘to exceed’ or ‘to surpass’. Thus, the construction typically includes two predicates, one which is the comparative predicate, and another which is the ‘exceed’-verb. The comparee NP is the subject of the ‘exceed’-verb. Duala (Bantu; Cameroon) presents an instance of the Exceed Comparative, as does Thai.

- (4) Duala (Ittmann 1939: 187)

*nín` ndábò e koló búkà nìne*  
 this house it big exceed that  
 ‘This house is bigger than that.’

- (5) Thai (Warotamasikkhadit 1972: 71)

*kǎw sǔŋ kwǎ kon túk kon*  
 he tall exceed man each man  
 ‘He is taller than anyone.’

**Locational Comparatives**, on the other hand, are characterized by the fact that the standard NP is invariably construed in a case form which also has a locational/adverbial function. Depending on the exact nature of this function, Locational Comparatives can be divided into three further subtypes. *From*-comparatives mark the standard NP as the source of a movement, with a marker meaning ‘from’ or ‘out of’. *To*-comparatives construct the standard NP as the goal of a movement (‘to, towards’, ‘over, beyond’) or as a benefactive (‘for’). Finally, *At*-comparatives encode the standard NP as a location, in which an object is at rest (‘in’, ‘on’, ‘at’, ‘upon’). Illustrations of the various subtypes of Locational Comparatives are from Mundari (Munda; India), Uzbek (Turkic; Uzbekistan), and Estonian for *from*-comparatives; Siuslaw (Siuslawan; Oregon) and Maasai (Nilotic; Kenya and Tanzania) for *to*-

comparatives; and Ahaggar Tuareg (Berber; southern Algeria) and Tubu (Nilo-Saharan; Chad and Niger) for *at*-comparatives. For the purposes of the map, however, this internal variation within the Locational Comparative has been ignored.

- (6) Mundari (Hoffmann 1903: 110)

*sadmo-ete hati maranga-e*  
horse-from elephant big-3SG.PRES  
'The elephant is bigger than the horse.'

- (7) Uzbek (Sjoberg 1963: 142)

*otam u otam-dan yosh*  
father.my that man-from young  
'My father is younger than that man.'

- (8) Estonian (Oinas 1966: 140)

*kevad on sügis-est ilusam*  
spring is fall-from more.beautiful  
'The spring is more beautiful than the fall.'

- (9) Siuslaw (Frachtenberg 1922a: 555)

*sea his na-tc*  
he good me-to  
'He is better than me'

- (10) Maasai (Tucker and Mpaayi 1955: 93)

*sapuk olkondi to lkibulekeny*  
big hartebeest to waterbuck  
'The hartebeest is bigger than the waterbuck.'

- (11) Ahaggar Tuareg (Hanoteau 1896: 52)

*kemmou tehousid foull oult ma m*  
you pretty.2SG.F upon sister of you  
'You are prettier than your sister.'

(12) Tubu (Lukas 1953: 45)

*sa-umma gere do mado*

eye-his blood on red

‘His eye is redder than blood.’

Turning now to the derived-case comparatives, in which the case marking of the standard NP is derived from — or “parasitic on” — the case marking of the comparee NP, we note that, once again, two subtypes can be distinguished. First, there is the **Conjoined Comparative**. Here the comparative construction usually consists of two structurally independent clauses, one of which contains the comparee NP, while the other contains the standard NP. Furthermore, the two clauses show a structural parallelism, in that the grammatical function of the comparee NP in one of the clauses is duplicated by the grammatical function of the standard NP in the other clause. If, for example, the comparee functions as the grammatical subject in its clause, the standard NP will also have subject status in its clause.

Since the construction has two clauses, it follows that the construction will also have two independent predicates. In other words, the comparative predicate is expressed twice. There are two ways in which this double expression may be effectuated. The language may employ antonymous predicates in the two clauses (‘good–bad’, ‘strong–weak’). Alternatively, the two predicates may show a positive–negative polarity (‘good–not good’, ‘strong–not strong’). An example of the first variant is found in Amele (Madang; north–eastern Papua New Guinea); the second variant has been attested for Menomini (Algonquian; Wisconsin). Sentence (15) illustrates one of the comparative constructions in Malay. Here the standard–NP and the comparee–NP are conjoined as sentence topics, and the following clause predicates the property of the comparee–NP only; that is, in this (rather infrequent) variant of the Conjoined Comparative the comparative predicate is expressed only once.

For the purposes of the map, all variants of the Conjoined Comparative are treated as a single category.

- (13) Amele (Roberts 1987: 135)

*jo i ben jo eu nag*  
house this big house that small  
'This house is bigger than that house.'

- (14) Menomini (Bloomfield 1962: 506)

*Tata'hkes-ew nenah tēh kan*  
strong-3SG I and not  
'He is stronger than me.'  
(lit. 'He is strong and I (am) not (strong).')

- (15) Malay (Lewis 1968: 157)

*kayu batu bĕrat batu*  
wood stone heavy stone  
'Stone is heavier than wood.'

A second subtype of derived-case comparison is defined negatively, in that the standard NP has derived case, but the construction does not have the form of a coordination of clauses. Instead, the construction features a specific **comparative particle** which accompanies the standard NP. The English *than*-comparative is an instance of this **Particle Comparative**. Other examples are the comparative construction in French, with its comparative particle *que*, and the comparative construction in Hungarian, which features the particle *mint* 'than, like'.

- (16) French (Bernard Bichakjian, p.c.)

*tu es plus jolie que ta sœur*  
you are more pretty than your sister  
'You are prettier than your sister.'

(17) Hungarian (Edith Moravcsik, p.c.)

*István magasa-bb mint Peter*

István.NOM tall-more than Peter.NOM

‘István is taller than Peter.’

In summary, the map of comparative constructions shows the areal distribution of four types. Two of these types (viz. the Locational Comparative and the Exceed Comparative) are instances of fixed-case comparison, while the other two (viz. the Conjoined Comparative and the Particle Comparative) are instances of derived-case comparison. As a result, the following four values are shown on the map:

@	1.	Locational Comparative	78
@	2.	Exceed Comparative	33
@	3.	Conjoined Comparative	34
@	4.	Particle Comparative	22
total			167

### 3. Predicate marking in comparative constructions

Apart from, or in addition to, case assignment of the standard NP, a further possible parameter in the typology of comparative constructions might be considered to be the presence or absence of comparative marking on the predicate. In the vast majority of languages, such overt marking is absent; predicative adjectives in comparatives retain their unmarked, “positive”, form. Some languages, however, mark a predicative adjective in a comparative construction by means of a special affix (e.g., *-er* in English, German and Dutch, *-ior* in Latin, *-bb* in Hungarian, *-ago* in Basque) or a special adverb (*more* in English, *plus* in French). Especially in the case of comparative affixes, the etymological origin is largely unknown. As for the areal distribution of predicate marking in comparatives, it is an almost exclusively European phenomenon, and is particularly frequent in

languages that have a particle comparative construction. For a tentative explanation of this latter correlation see Stassen (1985: ch. 15). In the map the phenomenon of comparative predicate marking has not been taken into account.

#### **4. Geographical distribution**

As the map demonstrates, the areal distribution of the various types of comparative constructions is striking (see also Heine 1994). For one thing, the Exceed Comparative appears to be almost exclusively restricted to two areas, viz. sub-Saharan Africa, and China and Southeast Asia. No less limited is the distribution of the Particle Comparative, which turns out to have its base in the modern languages of Europe; instances of this type outside Europe (such as the Uto-Aztecan languages in North and Central America) may well be cases of influence from English and/or Spanish. The Conjoined Comparative has a stronghold in Australia and New Guinea, and is also prominent in the Amazon basin. Finally, the Locational Comparative is the rule in northern Africa and in the vast landmass of Eurasia (including the Middle East and India, but excluding Europe), and can also be found in Eskimo languages and in scattered instances over the Americas, in Polynesia, and in Australia and Papua New Guinea.