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What is and what is not a comparative construction

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Despite many in-depth studies on comparative constructions, surprisingly there seem to be little consensus on how to delimitate the category of comparative constructions, that is, which linguistic utterances expressing comparison should be understood as “comparative constructions”, and included in studies on the topic. While expressions like *compared to John, Mark is taller* are almost universally omitted, the reasons for doing so are seldom explicitly discussed. My presentation aims to fill this gap by providing a modified definition of the term “comparative construction” (here limited to COI constructions), focusing on the distinction between comparative constructions and lexical comparison.

The extant literature approaches this issue in various ways. Some authors, like Ultan (1972) or Treis (2018) do not provide an actual definition of a comparative construction, nor explicitly acknowledge the problem of delimitation. Andersen (1983: 99-100) offers three criteria an utterance must fulfill to be accepted as a comparative construction; 1. number of entities and qualities taking part in comparison; 2. process vs result of comparison; 3. explicitness vs implicitness of comparison. Of these, the interpretation of criterion two is somewhat unclear. The other two, while useful for other purposes, are broad enough to be fulfilled by expressions of the *compared to John, Mark is taller* type. Stassen (1985: 15) formulates a definition of a comparative construction, but it too is not narrow enough to exclude the *compared to* constructions. Despite this, neither Andersen nor Stassen actually include such construction in their samples. Dixon (2012: 359-360) directly confronts the issue of delimitation when he states that while all languages can express comparison, not all languages have comparative constructions. The languages which do not have comparative constructions are said to use what he calls “comparative strategies”. Unfortunately, he does not provide a clear definition of a comparative construction, which makes it difficult to differentiate the two in practice.

In my paper, I introduce the distinction between comparative constructions and “lexical comparisons”, both encompassed under the umbrella term “comparative expression”. This distinction is based on whether the standard marker of the expression in question is a productive form of an inflectional paradigm of a content word which itself signifies comparison. If so, then I treat it as a lexical comparison, and not a comparative construction. I also provide four tests meant to clearly distinguish between the two. The tests are based on the following criteria: 1. function vs content word; 2. comparative meaning of derivational base vs other meaning; 3. petrified vs productive form; 4. language specific criteria.

Additionally, I discuss two types of constructions which need to be reevaluated in light of the proposed paradigm, the *Exceed Comparative* and the *Conjoined Comparative*. I conclude that they are not comparative constructions, the former being a lexical comparison, while the latter is not a comparative expression at all, unless its comparative meaning is explicit (that is, unless it is

grammaticalized to the point that either its etymological meaning has been lost, or the two meanings can be clearly opposed (as in the case of polysemy)).

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