The syntactic category of comparative complements cross-linguistically*

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1 Introduction

comparative constructions: than-XP expressing the standard value of comparison:

(1) Ralph is taller than Mary.

question: category of the element THAN cross-linguistically and in (1)

THAN can be a C or a P head:

(2) a. Ralph is taller than she is.

b. Raulo è più alto di te.
   Ralph is more tall.M of you.ACC
   ‘Ralph is taller than you.’

in (2a): tensed clause can be recovered, subject naturally in the nominative  
→ than a C head

in (2b): no clause can be recovered, only a single DP remnant in the accusative possible  
→ di a P head

question: status of surface-ambiguous cases like (1):

• reduced full (tensed) CP – Bresnan (1973), Lechner (2004)

• PP, than having two separate lexical entries as C and P – Hankamer (1973)

• CP without tense specification, no proper ellipsis – following Bacskaï-Atkari (2014b)

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proposal: cross-linguistically also intermediate types between prototypical C and P, types can be put on a cline and grammaticalisation possible

- C heads always taking full (tensed) clauses – e.g. Afrikaans
- C heads taking either a full (tensed) clause or a small (tenseless) clause, small clause option restricted to constructions where an external case assigner is available – e.g. German
- C heads taking either a full (tensed) clause or a small (tenseless) clause, small clause option available across the board – e.g. English
- P heads – e.g. Italian *di*

2 Phrasal comparatives

Italian *di* takes a DP complement:

(3) Raulo è più alto *di* te.
Ralph is more tall.M of you.ACC
‘Ralph is taller than you.’

structure cannot be expanded:

(4) a. *Raulo è più alto *di* tu *sei.*
Ralph is more tall.M of you.NOM be.2SG
‘Ralph is taller than you.’

b. *Maria ama Giorgio più *di* Anna Pietro.
Mary loves George more of Anna Peter
‘Mary loves George more than Anna loves Peter.’


(5) a. Maria ama Giorgio più *che* Anna Pietro.
Mary loves George more that Anna Peter
‘Mary loves George more than Anna loves Peter.’

b. Maria è più intelligente *che* divertente.
Mary is more intelligent that entertaining,
‘Mary is more intelligent than entertaining.’

hence: *di* is a P element taking a regular DP complement

similar: Polish *od* ‘from’ + DP in the genitive (Borsley & Jaworska 1981: 80, ex. 8; cf. also Stolz 2013: 56–57):

(6) Jan jest wyższy *od* Piotra.
John is taller from Peter.GEN
‘John is taller than Peter.’
P element may be the head of a lexical Kase projection (KP) cross-linguistically
lexical cases: instances of PP (see e.g. Asbury 2005; 2008)
KP the lowest PP layer, immediately above the DP; KP tops off the nominal projec-
tion, projections of higher P constitute a different extended projection (Den Dikken
2010, cf. also Dékány & Hegedüs 2014 on Hungarian)

Russian genitive case (cf. the discussion in Bacskaí-Atkari 2014c: 47–48):

(7) Ona vyše svoix odnoklassnikov.
she taller her.PL.GEN classmates.GEN
‘She is taller than her classmates.’

Greek genitive case (dated; see Bacskaí-Atkari 2015a):

(8) Eida mia gynaika psiloteri tis miteras mou.
saw.1SG a woman taller the.GEN mother.GEN my
‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’


(9) Mari magasabb Péternél.
Mary taller Peter.ADE
‘Mary is taller than Peter.’

importantly: PP-comparatives available across the board – not linked to a specific posi-
tion in the clause

3 Clausal comparatives – tensed clauses

two indicators:

• full clause recoverable with a tensed verb

• remnant DP bears underlying structural case – nominative subjects

exemplified by German als ‘than’:

(10) a. Der Tisch ist länger als das Büro breit ist.
the.M.NOM table is longer than the.N.NOM office wide is
‘The table is longer than the office is wide.’

b. Ralf ist größer als ich/*mich.
Ralph is taller than I.NOM/I.ACC
‘Ralph is taller than I am.’

similar patterns attested cross-linguistically – Germanic, Slavic, Romance, Hungarian,
Greek have clausal comparatives

structure of full clauses like (10a) straightforward – complement of C an ordinary finite
clause in the language
structure of elliptical clauses like (10b): FP (functional projection) generated above TP, remnant moves to [Spec,FP], F head carries the ellipsis feature [E], complement of F elided, see Merchant (2001)

(11)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{CP} \\
\text{C'} \\
\text{C} \\
\text{CP} \\
\text{als} \quad x-\text{groß} \\
\text{C'} \\
\text{F} \\
\text{FP} \\
\text{DP}_j \\
\text{F'} \\
\text{ich} \\
\text{F} \\
\langle \text{TP} \rangle \\
\text{[E]}_t_j \_t_i \_b_i \_n
\end{array}
\]

case assignment: regularly in TP (Bacskaï-Atkari 2014b)

lower CP: hosts the operator (cf. Chomsky 1977, Kennedy 2002 on relative operator movement in comparatives); no overt material in [Spec,CP] if the operator itself is zero (marked here as “x”; see the “Overtness Requirement” of Bacskaï-Atkari 2014c)

Icelandic similar (nominative/accusative system, see Hróarsdóttir 2001: 115–116 ↔ Mainland Scandinavian nominative/oblique system):

(12)  
\text{Egill er hærri en þú.}  
\text{Egill is taller than you.NOM}  
\text{‘Egill is taller than you.’}

Afrikaans:

(13)  
\text{Sy is langer as ek.}  
\text{she is taller than I.NOM}  
\text{‘She is taller than I am.’}

Greek (Giannakidou & Yoon 2011: 627, ex. 10):

(14)  
\text{I Kiki ine psiloteri apoti i Ariadhni.}  
\text{the.NOM Kiki is taller than the.NOM Ariadne}  
\text{‘Kiki is taller than Ariadne.’}
Hungarian:

(15) Mari magasabb, mint Péter.
Mary taller than Peter.NOM
‘Mary is taller than Peter.’

Czech:

(16) Marie jest vyšší než já.
Mary is taller than I.NOM
‘Mary is taller than I am.’

→ elliptical structures like (10b) can be derived from full clauses, pattern attested cross-linguistically

however: variation in colloquial Dutch:

(17) Ik ben langer dan hij/ hem.
I am taller than he.NOM/he.ACC
‘I am taller than he is.’

English:

(18) Ralph is taller than I/me.
→ a general ellipsis mechanism is not sufficient for the analysis of all reduced comparatives

4 Clausal comparatives – tenseless clauses

so far: two types of clausal comparatives:

• languages with regular clausal patterns (German, Afrikaans)
• languages that show deviation (English, colloquial Dutch)

Afrikaans: case of remnant DP always matches underlying case (Bacska-Atkari 2014a):

(19) Ek het ’n vrou langer as sy gesien.
I have.1SG a woman taller than she.NOM seen
‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

↔ unexpected pattern in German (Bacska-Atkari 2014b):

(20) Ich habe einen größeren Mann als meinen Vater gesehen.
I have.1SG a.M.ACC taller.M.ACC man than my.M.ACC father seen
‘I saw a taller man than my father is.’

nominative remnant associated with a different meaning:

(21) Ich habe einen größeren Mann als mein Vater gesehen.
I have.1SG a.M.ACC taller.M.ACC man than my.M.NOM father seen
‘I saw a taller man than my father saw.’
same distribution in Icelandic:

(22) a. Ég hærri konu en móður mín.
   I saw.1SG taller woman than mother.ACC my.ACC
   ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

   b. Ég hærri konu en móðir mín.
   I saw.1SG taller woman than mother.NOM my.NOM
   ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’

no accusative in predicative constructions in German and Icelandic otherwise
(↔ English), see (10b) and (12)

core idea (cf. Bacskaï-Atkari 2014b): no full tensed clause in (20)

- PredP generated below FP instead of TP – phenomenon restricted to predicative clauses in German
- no nominative case assignment in base-generation position of the subject
- case assignment from matrix transitive verb – phenomenon restricted to cases where there is a potential case assigner, unlike simple predicative clauses like (10b)

reduced, tenseless THAN-XP has to be adjacent to the matrix object (constituency):

(23) *Ich habe einen größeren Mann gesehen als meinen Vater.
   I have.1SG a.M.ACC taller.M.ACC man seen than my.M.ACC father
   ‘I saw a taller man than my father is.’

structure of reduced tenseless clauses:

(24) CP
    |   C’
    |     C
    |        FP
    |            als DP_f
    |                meinen Vater
    |                    F
    |                          <PredP>
    |                              [E]  t_i x-groß

lower CP absent – no operator movement → ellipsis takes place to eliminate an ungrammatical relative operator in its base position (no relative in situ, see Bacskaï-Atkari 2014c; see also the analysis of Bacskaï-Atkari & Kántor 2012 for similar phenomena in Finno-Ugric) → FP layer generated regularly, tenseless clauses always contain only a single remnant but no adjectival predicate, unlike tensed clauses
cross-linguistically: not all languages show the availability of such structures – see Afrikaans in (19) above

Greek: only nominative available but no predicative reading (Bacskaí-Atkari 2015a):

(25) Eida mia gynaika psiloteri ap’oti i/*ti mitera mou.
    saw.1sg a woman taller than the.NOM/the.ACC mother my
    ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’

Hungarian: only nominative, ambiguous (Bacskaí-Atkari 2015b):

(26) Láttam egy magasabb nót, mint Liza/*Lizát.
    saw.1sg a taller woman.ACC than Liz.NOM/Liz.ACC
    ‘I saw a taller woman than Liz.’

availability of accusative subjects (and hence tenseless complements) in German restricted

English:

(27) a. I saw a taller woman than her.
    ‘I saw a taller woman than she saw. / I saw a taller woman than she is.’

    b. Ralph is taller than me.

ambiguity in (27a): accusative available with a subject of an underlying lexical verb

availability of accusative in (27b): no external case assigner

→ English accusative case not restricted to cases where the matrix verb can assign accusative

→ a general ellipsis mechanism and small clauses dependent on the matrix transitive verb
    are not sufficient for the analysis of all reduced comparatives

5 Clausal comparatives – grammaticalised small clauses

so far: three types of clausal comparatives:

    • languages with regular clausal patterns involving tensed clauses (Afrikaans, Greek)
    • languages with predictable clausal patterns involving tensed and tenseless clauses
      (German, Icelandic)
    • languages that show deviation (English, Dutch)

question: THAN-XP in the third type always a CP, or CP/PP variation (two lexical elements of different categories for THAN)
potential sources of accusative case:

- default case accusative in English, appears in the absence of an overt case assigner (see Schütze 2001)

- assigned by THAN as a preposition (Hankamer 1973)

argument of Hankamer (1973) for P status: asymmetry in wh-extraction

(28)  
  a. Who are you taller than ti?  
  b. *Who are you taller than ti is?

however: prepositions in English allow both stranding and pied-piping:

(29)  
  a. What did you open the bottle [with ti]?  
  b. [With what] did you open the bottle ti?

no pied-piping with than:

(30) *[Than who(m)] are you taller ti?

asymmetry between (28a) and (28b) expected if the structure of tensed clauses and tenseless clauses is different underlingly – (28a) is not derived from a construction like (28b), but there is more structure than in a PP accusative default case (Schütze 2001) – generally available for DP remnants in English – no PredP necessary

(31) Ralph has more cats than me.

structure for cases like (31):

(32)  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{CP} \\
\text{C'} \\
\text{C} \\
\text{FP} \\
\text{than} \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{F} \\
\text{E} \\
\langle \text{DP} \rangle \\
\text{x-many cats}
\end{array}
\]

reanalysis: structure more economical and transparent, no movement step

but: predication relation more abstract (subject + degree predicate), F hosts degree argument in the complement (operator bound by matrix degree – comparative semantics), remnant XP in the specifier contrasted with a matching element of the matrix clause (if more options: ambiguity)
grammaticalisation scheme: (33a) → (33b) → (33c)

reanalysis involving the loss of PredP: grammaticalisation into a more functional projection (no predication proper, general predicative relation more similar to the Relator Phrase of Den Dikken 2006)

no reanalysis of FP into PP: would be less structure (DP complement of P head) but would be degrammaticalisation; also: structures in (33a) and (33b) have not disappeared, full, non-elliptical clauses exist, hence ample input for the learner for than as a proper C head

→ status of English than: still a C head, but complement types vary

6 Conclusion

various types of comparatives cross-linguistically:

- phrasal comparatives
- clausal comparatives with typical clausal surface pattern
- clausal comparatives with mixed surface pattern
overview:

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→ no universal phrasal (PP) analysis for structures with a single DP following THAN – clausal reduction attested in several languages

→ no universal TP-deletion analysis (ellipsis of full clauses) – even CPs can be minimal

References


