Relative features and lower complementisers in West-Germanic comparatives

Julia Bacskai-Atkari
University of Konstanz
julia.bacskai-atkari@uni-konstanz.de

Introduction

two major kinds of degree comparatives: comparatives expressing equality, as in (1a), and comparatives expressing inequality, as in (1b)

(1) a. Mary is as tall as Peter (is).
b. Mary is taller than Peter (is).

Dutch allows a combination of als/dan and dat (Bacskai-Atkari & Bandisch 2018):

(2) a. %Mary is even oud als dat Peter is.
   Emma is so old as that Peter is.
   ‘Emma is as old as Peter is.’
   b. %Mary is ouder dan dat Peter is.
   Emma is older than that Peter is.
   ‘Emma is older than Peter is.’

same pattern not attested in English and German → question: what the status of dat in (2) is

Comparatives and degree

degree comparatives have three important components:
   • a gradable predicate (AP) in the matrix clause
   • a degree element (e.g. -er) in the matrix clause
   • a comparative subclause

English:

(3) Mary is tall-er [than Peter is].

comparision without degree also possible:

(4) I would rather run the Marathon [than eat Brussels sprouts].

non-degree comparatives allow dass in German – comparing two propositions:

(5) a. Sie geht lieber ins Kino als dass sie zu Hause studiert.
   she goes rather to cinema rather than she at home studies
   ‘She rather goes to the cinema than studies at home.’

         
   C
   CP
   dat[complement]

b. Es ist zu schön, als dass es wahr sein könnte.
   it is too nice than it that true be could.
   ‘It is too nice to be true.’

role of dass: marking finiteness; it types clauses that are complete propositions

same pattern attested in Dutch but not in English

→ asymmetry in German: Dutch dat in degree comparatives has to do with the degree property

Comparatives and relative markers

degree comparative clauses involve operator movement to the left periphery (Bacskai-Atkari 2018, following Kennedy 2002 and Chomsky 1977):

(7) %Mary is taller than tall Peter is.

lower CP in comparatives hosts relative operators (Bacskai-Atkari 2016) – comparatives with an overt lower CP regularly non-elliptical in German (just like ordinary relative clauses)

wh-elements are underspecified for [rel]:
   • they can occur in [rel] contexts (interrogatives, which are complete propositions, Watanabe 2009)
   • they can (potentially) occur in [rel] contexts (ordinary relative clauses, which are not complete propositions: they contain a gap)

the relative CP can also have an overt relative head in comparatives (Bacskai-Atkari 2016):

(8) %Mary is taller than what Peter is.

Relative elements in West Germanic

relative pronouns (sensitive to matrix noun head):
   • d-pronouns: regular West-Germanic pattern (Brandner & Breining 2013) – German (de/der/das), Dutch (die/dit/dat)
   • wh-pronouns: English (since Middle English), German (restricted/formal), Dutch (dialectal, see Boef 2013)

relative complementisers (not sensitive to matrix noun head):
   • d-complementisers: English that, restricted: Flemish dat (mostly co-occurring with a wh-pronoun, see Bennis & Haegeman 1984, rarely even on its own, see Boef 2013)
   • wh-complementisers: German wo and was (dialectal, see Brandner & Breining 2013, Woel 2013, Fleischer 2017)

German dass not a relative complementiser but a finite subordinator specified as [–rel] → it cannot occur in relative clauses or in comparatives

English that a proper relative complementiser with an interpretable [i-rel] feature:

(10) I know the man that lives next door.
   – it types the clause as [rel] proper → no additional clause-typing layer (comparative) possible

Dutch dat: underspecified for [rel], can bear [a-rel] and does not type the clause as [rel] – similar to English what
   • it is not available in relative clauses in most dialects (exceptional dialects: different status as a grammaticalised relative complementiser)
   • it is available in comparatives – it licenses the higher comparative head

→ patterns in (2) follow from the general properties of dat

Conclusions

role of the element dat in Dutch comparatives and its status in West Germanic
   • English: proper [+rel] complementiser that not licensed
   • German: [–rel] complementiser dass not licensed
   • Dutch: underspecified dat licensed – triggers operator movement and allows higher CP

→ specific property of the Dutch pattern follows from the “midway” status of the element

References