

## Reduced and unreduced phrasal comparatives

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**Abstract** Degree heads combine with individual (*John is taller than [Mary]*) as well as clausal arguments (*John is taller than [Mary is]*). Does the degree head have the same meaning in these two argument structures? Two kinds of answers have been proposed in the literature: I. there is a single meaning where the 2-place degree head combines with a degree predicate, with a reduction operation that derives the DP argument from a degree predicate denoting clausal argument, and II. there are distinct meanings for each argument structure, one combining with an individual denoting DP (3-place degree head) and the other with a degree predicate denoting clause (2-place degree head). We show that languages vary in which of these answers they choose: English goes for option I and Hindi-Urdu and Japanese for versions of option II. Our account of this variation assumes that the crosslinguistic distribution of 2-place

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and 3-place degree heads is not in itself subject to crosslinguistic parametrization; they are just syntactic projections of the basic meaning of comparison. We advance a specific proposal which derives the differences between the languages from the morphosyntactic properties of ‘than’ and a preference for minimal structure.

**Keywords** Crosslinguistic variation in comparatives · Phrasal comparatives · Clausal comparatives · 2 vs. 3-place degree operators · Direct Analysis · Reduction Analysis · Hindi-Urdu · Japanese

## 1 Multiple routes to a single meaning

Natural languages often provide instances where two distinct structures map to the same meaning. The much-studied operation of passivization could be taken to provide an instance of two structures, the active and the passive, mapping to the same meaning. In this paper we are interested in examining a similar pair from the domain of comparative constructions. Many languages allow comparative meanings to be expressed by means of a clausal comparative (1a) and a phrasal comparative (1b). These seem to have the same meaning but differ in the category of the constituent that ‘than’ combines with. In the case of a clausal comparative, ‘than’ combines with a clause that has undergone some reduction operation and in the case of a phrasal comparative, ‘than’ combines with a DP. If we believe that the surface structures in (1) are directly the input to interpretation, we are led to the conclusion that the comparative degree head has a distinct semantic entry in the clausal comparative and the phrasal comparative. More specifically, if we assume following von Stechow (1984) that the clausal complement of ‘than’ denotes a degree description, then the degree head in a clausal comparative combines with a degree description while the degree head in a phrasal comparative combines with an individual.

### (1) Comparison:

#### a. Clausal Comparative:

John is taller than [Bill is].

– a degree head that combines with a clause

2-place degree head: 2 arguments—the extent of John’s tallness, the extent of Bill’s tallness

#### b. Phrasal Comparative:

John is taller than [Bill].

– a degree head that combines with an individual

3-place degree head: 3 arguments—Bill, John, the property of tallness

Further assumptions, to be made explicit in this paper, lead to the observation that clausal comparatives involve a 2-place degree head, which combines with two degree descriptions, while phrasal comparatives involve a 3-place degree head, which combines with two individual arguments and a predicate of degrees and individuals.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This paper consistently refers to the two degree heads as 2-place and 3-place ‘-er’. This arity distinction follows from syntactic assumptions we make concerning how the degree head combines with the