

Comparative Deletion and Comparative Clause Formation Cross-Linguistically

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My talk argues that the phenomenon of Comparative Deletion (CD), as attested in (Standard) English, is the result of various factors that may or may not operate in a given language, and hence languages/language varieties where these factors are absent do not exhibit Comparative Deletion. I will demonstrate that deletion is not directly related to information structural properties but is tied to an overtness requirement on certain left-peripheral elements, and that information structure in English plays a role only in the realisation of lower copies.

CD traditionally refers to the obligatory absence of a non-contrastive lexical AP (or NP) from the comparative subclause (cf. Bresnan 1973). This is illustrated in (1):

- (1) a. Mary is taller than ~~[x-tall]~~ Liz is ~~[x-tall]~~.
b. The desk is longer than ~~[x-wide]~~ the office is ~~[x-wide]~~.

I will argue that CD is not an operation targeting GIVEN, non-contrastive APs such as *tall* in (1a) and leaving non-GIVEN, contrastive APs such as *wide* in (1b) intact; rather, deletion takes place in a [Spec,CP] position in both cases. As is known, the quantified degree expression (QP) moves to a [Spec,CP] position in the comparative subclause via regular (relative) operator movement, required by the comparative operator given as *x* above (cf. Chomsky 1977, Kennedy and Merchant 2000), which results in there being two copies of the QP in the subclause, as indicated in (1). The higher copy of the QP is eliminated irrespectively of the information structural properties of the lexical AP. The reason for this deletion is that overt lexical phrases are licensed in an operator position only if the operator itself is overt. On the other hand, the overt realisation of a lower copy is enforced only if it is contrastive, which is the case in (1b) but not in (1a). The Standard English pattern is hence contingent upon three factors, namely that the operator is zero, that the operator is not extractable, and that the overt realisation of contrastive lower copies is licensed. Hence the expectation is that languages/dialects lacking any of these conditions do not show the Comparative Deletion pattern given in (1); I will demonstrate that this expectation is indeed borne out.

First, there are languages that allow overt comparative operators and certain speakers of English also allow *how* in comparatives like (2):

- (2) a. % Mary is taller than **how tall** Liz is.
b. % The desk is longer than **how wide** the office is.

A similar pattern is attested in Dutch for *hoe* ‘how’ (with considerable variation in the acceptability), in Czech for *jak* ‘how’ and in Hungarian for *amilyen* ‘how’ and *amennyire* ‘how much’. In all of these cases, the string of an overt operator and an overt lexical AP is allowed in the [Spec,CP]: the overtness requirement is satisfied by the presence of an overt operator and hence deletion is not required. In such configurations, information structure plays no role since the lexical AP is licensed irrespectively of whether it is contrastive or not.

Second, there are languages that have extractable comparative operators and thus allow for the stranding of the AP; I will show that the difference between extractable and non-extractable operators lies in their positions within the quantified degree expression containing the AP. While the overt operators *how*, *hoe* (Dutch) and *amilyen* (Hungarian) are non-extractable, the operators *jak* (Czech) and *amennyire* (Hungarian) are. The examples in (3) show the possible positions for the AP in Czech:

- (3) a. Marie je vyšší, než **jak** ^{??}**vysoký** je **vysoký** Karel **#vysoký**.
Mary is taller than how tall is tall Charles tall
‘Mary is taller than Charles.’
b. Ten stůl je delší, než **jak** ^{??}**široká** je **#široká** ta kancelář **široká**.

that desk is longer than how wide is wide that office wide
 ‘The desk is longer than the office is wide.’

While it is possible for the AP to move together with the operator to [Spec,CP], it is not the preferred option: rather, the AP is preferably located in a position that is associated with certain information structural properties: this is a clause-internal position for non-contrastive elements (such as *vyšoký*) and a clause-final (stress) position for contrastive ones (such as *široká*). If there is a mismatch between the position and the information structural status of the AP, the result is infelicitous. A similar phenomenon can be observed in Hungarian with respect to the availability of the preverbal (focus) position only for contrastive APs.

In sum, if the operator is separable, information structure may determine the preferred position of the AP (if there are multiple available positions) but it does not impose restrictions on whether the AP can be overtly realised. Note that separable operators need not be overt; German, for instance, has an extractable zero operator:

- (4) a. ?Maria ist größer als Michael **groß** ist.
 Mary is taller than Michael tall is
 ‘Mary is taller than Michael.’
- b. Der Tisch ist länger als das Büro **breit** ist.
 the.MASC table is longer than the.NEUT office wide is
 ‘The table is longer than the office is wide.’

Dutch and Estonian show similar behaviour; in these cases, the (remnant) AP can be realised overtly in its base position irrespectively of whether it is contrastive or not (unlike in English) since it is not a lower copy of a movement chain.

Third, there are languages that have zero, non-extractable operators (just as English) but they do not allow the realisation of the lower copy of a movement chain even if the AP is contrastive: this holds for Czech and Polish predicative comparatives with zero operators. The following Polish sentences were judged as ungrammatical by most speakers:

- (5) a. *Maria jest wyższa niż Karol jest **wysoki**.
 Mary is taller than Charles is tall
 ‘Mary is taller than Charles.’
- b. */?? Stół jest dłuższy niż biuro jest **szero**kie.
 desk is longer than office is wide
 ‘The desk is longer than the office is wide.’

I will show that the unavailability of lower copies in comparatives follows from a more general property of movement chains in these languages, which is related to the difference between multiple *wh*-fronting languages (Czech, Polish) and ones that do not allow overt multiple *wh*-fronting (English).

Cross-linguistic variation regarding comparative clause formation is hence derivable from differences in morphophonological properties (the overtness of the operator), syntactic structure (the position and the extractability of the operator) and the syntax–prosody interface (the realisation of lower copies). Seen in this light, the properties of English comparatives are derivable from general properties of the language and therefore Comparative Deletion is merely an epiphenomenal result of their interaction: a difference in these more general properties leads to different configurations in other languages/varieties in a systemic way.

References

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