

Compositionality in comparative constructions

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Semantic theories of comparative constructions have long struggled to provide a full compositional account of the “comparative cluster” formed by the comparative marker (i.e. *more*), the standard marker (i.e. *than*) and the standard of comparison. The difficulties arise from various sources. For instance, clausal and phrasal standards of comparison require comparative markers of different arities (e.g. Beck et al. 2012), a difference in the functional lexicon that moreover varies across languages (e.g. Bhatt & Takahasi 2011). In addition, the standard marker of comparison is typically assumed to be semantically vacuous, even in the face of suggestive syntax/semantics mappings between clausal and phrasal comparatives in languages with more than one standard marker (e.g. Alrenga et al. 2012).

The point of departure of this talk is the existence of dedicated standard markers for phrasal comparatives in some languages. I show that in Peninsular Spanish the choice of standard marker does not only depend on the syntactic size of the standard of comparison—as is usually assumed—but also on its semantic contribution. In particular, the choice depends on whether the comparison is established between two different individuals (relative to some dimension; as in *Liz is taller than Bill*) or instead involves direct comparison of degrees (as in *Liz is taller than 2m*). I discuss the ramifications of this conclusion for a variety of unrelated languages and suggest an analysis that emphasizes the joint semantic role of both comparative and standard markers.