Comparative Correlatives: the case of Italian Sign language and more …

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Comparative correlative (henceforth CC) constructions, exemplified in (1), are widespread across the languages of the world (Taylor, 2006). However, only a few studies investigate their characteristics in detail (Culicover and Jackendoff, 1999, henceforth CJ, Den Dikken, 2005). Furthermore, there is no agreement on their syntactic analysis (e.g., whether the two clauses of the CC are coordinated or subordinated), nor on their semantics (e.g., whether their meaning can be derived compositionally).

Our goals are both syntactic and semantic. As for the syntax of CCs, we will show that many of the properties described by CJ and Taylor (2006) are found also in Italian Sign Language (LIS), proving that this construction share a bunch of properties across languages and across modality: surface symmetry (2a); non-acceptability in isolation (2c); ATB wh-extraction (2e); inversion of the two clauses is not meaning-preserving (2a vs 2b). On the other hand, LIS CCs have their own specific syntactic and morphological properties: the presence of a specific non manual marker (indicated in 2i); non ATB wh-extraction only from the second member (2f-g); comparative meaning provided either by reduplication (2a) or by intensification (2d); only "true" gradable predicates allowed in the construction (2h). We analyze CCs in LIS as genuine correlative constructions, with the first member left-adjoined to the second (notice correlatives are a standard strategy for relativization in LIS, Cecchetto et al., 2006). This makes the pattern in (2) clearly accountable for, proving that CCs in LIS are well-behaved constructions. In particular, non ATB wh extraction asymmetry is expected, since it would require wh extraction from an island. As for the semantic interpretation, our starting point is the contrast shown in (3b-c), that, as far as we know, hasn't been noticed so far. (3b) expresses a generic statement: all (relevant) events of me eating more (than a value to be specified) ended up with me gaining weight. (3c) can only be read as episodic: there was a single event of me eating more (than a value), which was correlated with my getting fatter. Since the only difference between (3b) and (3c) is the aspectual value of the verbs, adapting a suggestion from Bonomi (1997) on when-constructions, we propose that CCs create a tripartite structure (with the CC subordinate clause as restriction, and the CC matrix clause as nuclear scope). The universal quantification over events emerges with habitual interpretations (connected with imperfective aspect); while existential quantification emerges when the sentence is interpreted episodically (with perfective aspect). As for the comparison, we assume that the comparative morpheme *più/more* has the usual semantics of standard comparative constructions, the only difference being that the standard of comparison (the than-clause) is implicit and contextually determined. Assuming Kennedy (1999)'s claim that comparison is a diagnostics to identify gradable predicates (cf. (4)), we explain (2h) assuming that in LIS comparative morphology requires gradable predicates. Moreover, we show that our analysis assigns to CCs with imperfective aspect (habitual interpretation) the same meaning Beck (1997) attributed to CCs. However, we do this maintaining a uniform semantics for the comparative morpheme *more*, without stipulating that CCs have a conditional structure. Our analysis also explains the marginality of CCs when marked with the perfective aspect in Italian, a fact previously unaccounted for.

Data

(1) The more he runs, the more he sweats

(2) a. GIANNI RUN-rep., SWEAT-rep. (the more Gianni runs, the more he sweats)

b. GIANNI SWEAT-rep., RUN-rep. (the more Gianni sweats, the more he runs)

c. *GIANNI RUN-rep (*Gianni increases his running, ok Gianni continued to run)

d. SEA DEEP-intens., WATER COLD INCREASE-intens. (the deeper the sea, the colder the water).

e. RUN-rep., SWEAT-rep. WHO (who the more runs, the more sweats?)

f. MUMMY SPEAK-rep., SLEEP-rep. WHO (who, the more mum speaks the more sleeps)

g. * SPEAK-rep., DADDY SLEEP-rep. WHO

h. * GIANNI ITALIAN-rep./intens., PIZZA EAT-rep. (the more Italian Gianni is, the more pizza he eats).

_____nmm _____nmm

i. [CP matrix [CP subordinate GIANNI RUN-rep.] SWEAT-rep.]

(3) a. Più mangio, più ingrasso

(The) more (I) eat, (the) more (I) get fat.

b. Più mangiavo, più ingrassavo

(The) more (I) atePAST.IMPF, (the) more (I) gotPAST.IMPF fat.

c. ? Più ho mangiato, più sono ingrassata.

(The) more (I) atePAST.PF, (the) more (I) gotPAST.PF fat.

(4) John is more American than Bill. (#, ok only with "special" reading)

Reference

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