1. Introduction

- **Standard assumption**
The semantics of comparison is encoded in the comparative morpheme –er/more and the standard marker than is taken to be semantically vacuous.

(1) John is taller than Bill (is).

- **Alternatives**
The standard marker is not semantically vacuous (Kennedy 2007, Arenga et al 2012, Schwarzschild 2014).

- **Main claim**
On the basis of data from Malayalam comparative constructions, I will show that than is not semantically vacuous. It encodes comparative semantics and works in tandem with the comparative marker more.

2. Malayalam Comparatives

- Two types of comparatives, depending on the standard marker: kaal-um and il-um. They both show clausal comparison and phrasal comparison (only phrasal variant shown below)

3. Distribution of more

- The distribution of more depends on the predicate.
- Malayalam does not have lexical adjectives. Property concepts, either relativized or nominalized, are used to build adjectival meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>kaal-um comparative</th>
<th>il-um comparative</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. NP comparative</td>
<td>obligatory more</td>
<td>obligatory more</td>
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<tr>
<td>(outside possession)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. NP comparative</td>
<td>optional more</td>
<td>obligatory more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(with possession)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Verbal comparative</td>
<td>obligatory more</td>
<td>obligatory more</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Relativized property</td>
<td>prohibited more</td>
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<tr>
<td>concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Nominalized</td>
<td>optional more</td>
<td>obligatory more</td>
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<tr>
<td>property concepts</td>
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**Generalization #2**: The behavior of more is quite distinct from the English –er/more.

4. Distribution of than

Implicit comparatives are allowed in English where the standard phrase is omitted.

(4) a. (Come out onto the porch.) It's cooler here.
(5) a. John has 3 pens. I have more.
     b. John is 6 ft tall. I am taller.

These comparatives are disallowed in Malayalam

(6) *Anil-ia oru pena unita, enikku kuuṭuttal unita.
     Anil-DAT a pen EX COP I-DAT more POSS V
     ‘Anil has a pen. I have more than that.

(7) Anil-ia oru pena unita, enikku [at-in-e kaaḷum] kuuṭuttal unita.
     Anil-DAT a penEX COP I-DAT that-ACC than more POSS V
     ‘Anil has a pen. I have more than that.

**Generalization #3**: More cannot appear alone without than

5. Analysis

- **How do we account for the variable behavior of the comparative marker?**
  - **Option 1**: The more encodes the comparative semantics. (the standard assumption)
    - We have no explanation for the distribution of the comparative marker
  - **Option 2**: A silent degree head (-er).
    - No systematic distinctions between –er and the comparative marker.
  - **Option 3**: Than is not semantically vacuous and in addition to the more encodes comparative semantics.

**Proposal**

- Than is not semantically vacuous and acts as a context setter.
- The phrase headed by than can function as a quantifier-domain adverbial whereby it restricts the domain of the degree quantifier more.

(8) than: \[ [ kaal-um ] ] = \lambda \text{D}_{<\text{d}.} \text{D} [ d > \text{max(D)} ]

- Thus in (1),
  - [Than Bill is] denotes a degree- a degree of tallness one would have to exceed in order to be taller than John.
  - This degree is Bill's height, the maximal degree to which Bill is tall.
  - More is an adnominal degree modifier, meaning along the lines of "in addition of", "in excess of".

(9) more: \[ [ kuuṭuttal ] ] = \lambda d \text{ax} . [ \mu (x) > d ]

- **Deriving the distribution of more**

**Assumptions**
- The standard phrase is a PP adjunct which extraposes for λ-abstraction to a position before the VP.
- Gradability is directly related to property possession (see Menon, in prep)

**When more is prohibited (relativized property concepts)**

- Than encodes comparison as a context setter, i.e. an implicit comparison
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**When more is optional (nominalized property concepts, NP comparative with possession)**

- PossP introduces a degree variable for PP to bind (see (2), the PossV is the head of the PossP).
- More gives the degree exceeding the specified standard.
- When more is optional (nominalized property concepts, NP comparative with possession)
  - It introduces the measure function as the NP and VP predicates are non-gradable.
  - These comparatives occur with a non possessive V, unlike (2)-(3).

6. Conclusion

- There is a maximally transparent mapping from surface syntax to meaning as both the comparative morpheme (more) and the standard morpheme (than) contribute to the semantics of comparison.
- The than can never be omitted from comparative constructions.
- The than phrase binds the degree argument in the matrix clause in bare comparatives or acts as a quantifier domain adverbial in the presence of more.

7. References


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