Degree-based Comparative Constructions in Ktunaxa

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Main contribution: The goal of this study is to describe and document comparative constructions in Ktunaxa, a language isolate spoken by the Ktunaxa people in the Columbia river basin in Canada and the United States. The data, based on original fieldwork, are considered within Beck *et al.*'s (2009) crosslinguistic typology of degree expressions. It is shown that patterns found in gradable constructions in Ktunaxa are not predicted by the typology. An alternative account of crosslinguistic variation in gradable expressions is discussed.

Crosslinguistic variation in the semantics of gradable expressions: Languages vary widely in how they encode gradability. Some languages like English have a rich inventory of degree morphology, while languages like Motu have only a portion of the morphemes found in English (Beck *et al.* 2009; Bochnak *et al.* 2020), and languages like Washo have none (Bochnak, 2015). Beck *et al* (2009) have proposed that variation in gradable expressions depends on 3 parameters: (i) whether languages possess degrees in their semantic ontology, giving rise to morphologically encoded comparatives and equatives, (ii) whether these degrees can be bound, giving rise to negative island effects in subcomparatives, and (iii) whether degree phrases can be realized overtly in the syntax, licensing measure phrases.

Gradable expressions in Ktunaxa: Ktunaxa seems to lack several constructions expected under degreefulness, it lacks equatives, differential comparatives, measure phrases and degree questions (Reisinger, *to appear*). However, the language possesses a rich inventory of comparative constructions given in (1-3). (1) involves comparative preverbal modifiers, (2) involves a bare gradable predicate, and (3) involves conjoined clauses involving antonyms.

(1) Małi **a·n**/**ʾisnił**/**ʾisił**/**qayaqanał** wiłqaˑni ʾis¢ Malian-s
    Mary COMPARATIVE   big-IND DEM Marianne-OBV
    'Mary is bigger than Marianne.'

(2) Małi wiłqaˑni ʾis¢ Malian-s   (3) Małi wiłqaˑni ¢ Malian ¢aquna-ni.
    Mary big-IND DEM Marianne-OBV   Mary big-IND CONJ Marianne short-IND
    'Mary is bigger than Marianne.'   'Mary is big and Marianne is short.'

Traditional diagnostics for the presence of degrees reveal that *a·n*, *ʾisnił*, and *qayaqanał* comparatives exhibit full-fledged degreefulness, while *ʾisił* and bare predicate comparatives exhibit partial evidence for degrees. Results are summarized in table 1.

	Degree comparatives	*qayaqanał*	*ʾa·n*	*ʾisnił*	*ʾisił*	Bare predicate	conjoined
Norm-relatedness	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Crisp judgments	✓	✓	✓	✓	#	✓	#
Subcomparatives	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	#	#
Negative island effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Table 1 : Results to traditional diagnostics for the presence of degrees

Discussion: Beck *et al.*'s typology cannot account for the fact that degrees are restricted small subset of the lexicon as it is the case in Ktunaxa. Moreover, it predicts that if a language allows subcomparatives, as it is the case in Ktunaxa, it should also have measure phrases and degree questions, constructions that are unattested in Ktunaxa. Based on Wellwood (2015), Bochnak *et al*. (2020) suggest that degrees are not introduced by the gradable predicates themselves, but rather

by functional heads instantiated through degree morphology. Under that view, crosslinguistic variation is accounted for by properties of functional heads rather than properties of large categories of morphemes. The patterns found in Ktunaxa are consistent with this approach.

References

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