A Note on Implicit Comparatives
Author(s): John Robert Ross
Source: *Linguistic Inquiry*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Jul., 1970), pp. 363-366
Published by: The MIT Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4177577
Accessed: 22/04/2013 13:16

Kuno, S. (to appear) "Some Properties of Non-referential Noun Phrases," in Roman Jakobson, ed., *Studies in Oriental and General Linguistics*, the TEC Company, Tokyo, Japan.

Kuroda, S.-Y. (1968) "English Relativization and Certain Related Problems," *Language* 44, 244–266, reprinted in D. Reibel and S. Schane, eds., *Modern Studies in English*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Lambton, A. K. S. (1963) *Persian Grammar*, Cambridge, England.

Lewis, G. L. (1967) *Turkish Grammar*, Oxford, England.

A Note on Implicit Comparatives

John Robert Ross, MIT

Consider the words *great* (*large*, *big*, etc.), *tall*, *wide*, *thick*, *many* (*much*), *often*, *fast*, etc., as opposed to *small* (*little*), *short*, *narrow*, *thin*, *few* (*little*), *seldom*, *slow*, etc. The former set of words seem to share some element of meaning which is not present in the latter words. One reflection of this is the fact that the former words often have paraphrases which make use of the words *great* and *large*, as shown in (1).

(1) tall = of great height
many = a great (large) number = great in number
much = a great (large) amount
often = on many (= a great number of) occasions
fast = with great speed

I will not be concerned further with justifying the claim that the former words belong to a natural semantic class; for my present purposes, we can take this assertion as being intuitively clear.

Instead, I will comment as to how the meanings of these words are to be represented. Conceptually, it is clear that all these words assert a comparison between some observed instance and an average value. Thus if the average number of people at my parties is 30, then if around 45 (the exact number is not important here) come to one of my parties, I could say (2).

(2) Many people were at my party.

As McCawley (1968) has pointed out, however, *many* does not denote some fixed number or range of numbers (as is roughly the case with *several*). Thus if the number of fans at an average Harvard football game is 20,000 (say), one would not be able to use (3) if 20,015 showed up at the game:

(3) Many glum alumni watched the Elis coast to an easy victory over the Cantabs.

Rather, (3) could be used if roughly 30,000 had turned up.

Thus one might assume that while *many* (and similarly for the other words mentioned above) cannot denote a fixed difference, it at least denotes a fixed ratio, somewhat as in (4).

(4) $$\frac{\text{Observed number of } x}{\text{Average number of } x} \geq 1.5 \pm$$

It is the purpose of this note to show that the fixed ratio hypothesis of (4) is also wrong. Thus compare the senses of (5a) and (5b).

(5) a. Jim Ryun ran the mile fast.
b. I drove to New Haven fast.

Assuming that an average mile is 4:00–4:05, one could use (5a) if Ryun's time were 3:55.

(6) $$\frac{\text{Ryun's time}}{\text{Average time}} = \frac{235 \text{ sec}}{240\text{–}245 \text{ sec}}$$

But if an average drive to New Haven is $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours, then a fast drive is something like 2 hours, or possibly 2 hours and 10 minutes.

(7) $$\frac{\text{My time}}{\text{Average time}} = \frac{120\text{–}130 \text{ min}}{150 \text{ min}}$$

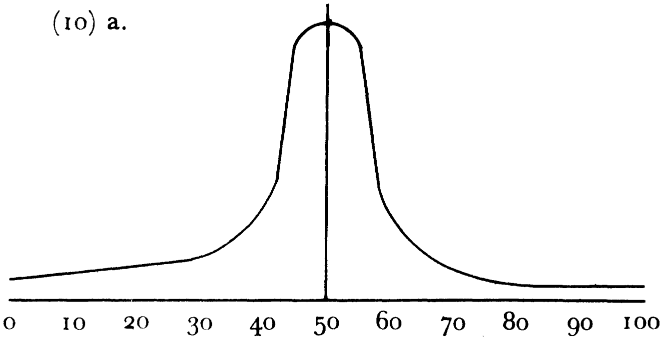
It is obvious that to use *fast* correctly, it is not sufficient to know merely an observed speed and an average speed: one must also know how much variation around the average there is. It is as if the correct use of these words presupposes the knowledge of the entire curve which represents the distribution of the properties being compared. The same remarks apply to all the words cited. Thus (8) and (9) show the same differences in ratio as (5) does.

(8) a. The last issue of *The Journal of Symbolic Logic* contained many typos.
b. The last book Mouton published contained many typos.

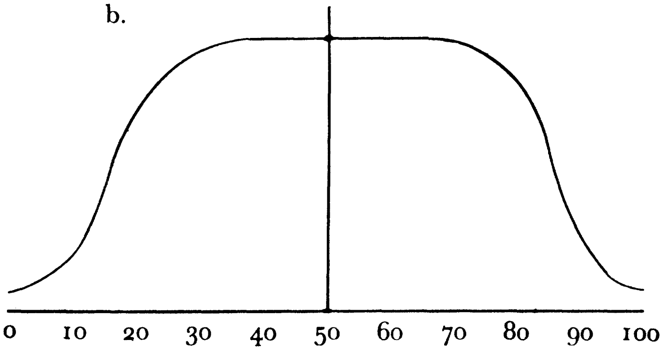
(9) a. Last year the Sox often made triple plays.
b. Last year, the Secretary of Defense often told a little white lie.

If the curve is as in (10a), *many* might be usable with a ratio of 1.1, whereas in (10b) the ratio might need to be 1.5.

(10) a.



b.



That is, apparently the meaning of such implicitly comparative words as those that have been being discussed must be represented somewhat as in (11):

(11) Number of people at my party − average number of people at my parties $\cong$ 1 S.D.

(Again, let us not quibble about whether 1 Standard Deviation from the mean is too much or too little for *fast*. The point is that such words presuppose a knowledge of the scattering around the mean.)

This analysis predicts as a consequence that a knowledge of the average and an observed value are not enough for a decision as to whether one of the words under discussion can be used, a prediction which is borne out. Thus even if we know that the average private takes 30 seconds to assemble a microglench, and that Kowalski took 25 seconds, we still don't know, in our ignorance of the distribution of times for the assembly of microglenches, whether (12) is appropriate or not.

(12) Private Kowalski assembled that microglench fast.

How a formal semantic theory is to be constructed in such a way as to be able to accommodate such formulae as (11) I do not know.

Reference

McCawley, J. D. (1968) "The Role of Semantics in Grammar," in E. Bach and R. Harms, eds., *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

One More Can of Beer

Peter Culicover, MIT

Jespersen observes in his *English Grammar* that sentences like the following have a conditional interpretation.

(1) One more can of beer and I'm leaving.

It seems to be the case that such sentences are potentially infinitely ambiguous. Given any situation involving quantities of cans of beer, this situation can be used as a potential condition under which the proposition "I'm leaving" will be true. For example,

(2) a. $\text{If} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{you give me} \\ \text{I get hit by} \\ \text{I see} \\ \text{I hear about} \\ \text{you buy} \\ \text{John crushes} \\ \text{anybody drinks} \\ \quad\vdots \end{array} \right\} \text{one more can of beer,}$

then I'm leaving.

b. $\text{If one more can of beer} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{hits me} \\ \text{explodes} \\ \text{rolls in front of me} \\ \text{hits you} \\ \text{hits anyone} \\ \text{comes out of the} \\ \quad \text{darkness} \\ \quad\vdots \end{array} \right\}$

then I'm leaving.

Sentence (1) may also be a promise or a threat, as is usually the case with a conditional. The preferred reading depends on the extent to which the consequent is interpreted as detrimental or beneficial to the person to whom the sentence is being addressed.

How should we derive such sentences? One suggestion would be to have a base rule like (3).

(3) $S \rightarrow NP \text{ and } S$