

## A Note on Becoming

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## 1. The sentences

- (1) Melvin became as tall as any of his cousins.
- (2) Melvin became taller than the average Ohioan.
- (3) Melvin became the tallest linguist in America.

have (at least) two readings each--one reading in which Melvin changes, one in which other circumstances change so that Melvin's relative height changes. The latter reading is clear in

- (4) When all the American linguists over six feet tall expired in an epidemic of terminal aphasia, Melvin became the tallest linguist in America.

Let us say that the first reading exemplifies the INTERIOR sense of become, the second the EXTERIOR sense of become. In general, become, when followed by a complex equative, comparative, or superlative construction, may have either sense, although in examples like

- (5) Melvin became as tall as his father.

the interior sense is far more likely than the exterior sense, for obvious reasons.

2. It is not unreasonable to suppose that a simple production like

- (6) Melvin is tall.

is a covert comparative, with a more remote structure resembling the structure of

- (7) Melvin is taller than the average person.

Similarly,

- (8) Melvin became tall.

might be supposed to have a more remote structure resembling the structure of

- (9) Melvin became taller than the average person.

Because became in (9) has both the interior and exterior sense, became in (8) should be correspondingly ambiguous. But became in (8) has only the interior sense;

- (10) When everyone over six feet was drowned in a freak storm, Melvin became tall.

is bizarre unless understood as an assertion of a temporal association of the storm and an increase in Melvin's height.

3. To maintain the covert comparative analysis of positive adjectives, one would need to suppose that the reduction of a structure like that of taller than the average person to tall is impossible when the verb preceding the adjective construction is become in its exterior sense (but possible when this verb is is, or grew, or become in its interior sense). I know of no elaboration of the covert comparative analysis in which this peculiar restriction has an explanation. In the standard analysis of positive adjectives the problem does not, of course, arise.