



Comparison and Presupposition

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KICKING THE HABIT

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Continuing Carden and Miller's squib on "Problominalizations" in the October, 1970 issue (wherein they treated the advertisement "We're experts at enlarging. Let us make some for you."), consider the following taken from a cartoon in the Los Angeles *Times* a year or two ago:

- (1) Nailbiters just can't kick it alone!

Here we are not just dealing with "simple" nominalization or verbalization: "it" must refer to an expression such as "the habit of biting (one's) nails". We are faced now with the splitting up of an idiom ("to kick the habit") in addition to all of the other problems—which, it seems to me, is linguistic quicksand for the present theories.

COMPARISON AND PRESUPPOSITION

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Some adjectives appear able to "neutralize" in comparisons. In (1) and (2) below both John and Mary might be tall or average or short, or John might be gigantic and Mary pint-size:

- (1) Mary is not as tall as John.
(2) John is taller than Mary.

But that is not the case in (3), where "complementary" *so* replaces *as*:¹

- (3) Mary is not so tall as John.

In (3) John must be considered tall, and so must Mary, I believe. Both (4) and (5) with *so* appear distinctly odd, whereas (6) is quite acceptable:

- (4) Little Mary is not $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} \text{as} \\ *_{so} \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ tall as a pygmy.
(5) A pygmy is not $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} \text{as} \\ *_{so} \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ tall as a giant.
(6) Even a *tall* pygmy is not so tall as a giant.

The fact that the pygmy in (6) is tall only for a pygmy does not prevent each referent from being considered "tall"; thus *so* is appropriate. Apparently frames of reference are taken into account.

In contradistinction to (3), the addition of *even* to the predicate of (1) demands that both John and Mary *not* be tall—in the prevailing frame of reference:

- (7) Mary is not even as tall as John.
(8) Mary is not as tall as John, even.

"Not tall" is to be interpreted against some standard; as (9) indicates, there are many possible standards:

¹ Many school grammars recommend or prescribe replacing *as* with *so* in a negative comparison.

- (9) Though John is tall, he's not tall enough to reach the chandelier, and Mary's not even as tall as John.

Sentences like (7) and (8) occur most often after a primary comparison:

- (10) John is not as tall as $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{average} \\ \text{Bill} \end{array} \right\}$ and Mary is not even as tall as John.
 (11) John is only 6' 4'', and Mary is not even as tall as John.²

Thus the presence of *even* in (7) and (8) signals a presupposed comparison, which perhaps is carried along something like this:

- (12) Mary is not $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{even} \\ \phi \end{array} \right\}$ as tall as John [John is as tall as X].
 (13) Mary is not $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{even} \\ \phi \end{array} \right\}$ as tall as John [John is taller than X].

At any rate, *even*, guaranteeing not tall, and *so*, guaranteeing tall, cannot survive together in a comparison:

- (14) *Mary is not even so tall as John.

This fact would be easy to explain if we did assume that presuppositions are present in such comparisons, since they would form a contradiction:

- (15) Mary is not even so tall as John [*John is tall and John is not tall].

There is a similar difference between *more* and *less*. In both cases below John must have *some* money but Mary may have either some or none:

- (16) John has more money than Mary.
 (17) Mary has less money than John.

Thus, *more* guarantees some money on its left but not on its right, *less* guarantees some money on its right but not on its left:

- (18) John has more money than Mary, since in fact $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} *he \\ she \end{array} \right\}$ has none.
 (19) Mary has less money than John, since in fact $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} *he \\ she \end{array} \right\}$ has none.

The addition of *even* before *more* and *less* makes a distinct difference between them, however; now *more* guarantees money on both sides, but *less* is unchanged:

² That *only* implies a comparison here seems reasonable; how it does so is another story.

(20) John has even more money than Mary, since in fact $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} *he \\ *she \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ has none.

(21) Mary has even less money than John, since in fact $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} *he \\ she \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ has none.

As before, this difference could be explained if we assume presuppositions are present. Adding a presupposition to (20) makes no difference; there is only one choice:

(22) [Mary has more money than X [Mary has $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} *no \\ some \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ money]]

But when we add a presupposition to (21), we seemingly will have two choices:

(23) [John has less money than X [John has $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} no \\ some \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ money]]

But if we were to add the no money proposition to (21) we would be saying that Mary has even less money than no money—a contradiction. Only choosing the proposition guaranteeing some money will keep (21) grammatical.

(24) Mary has even less money than John [John has less money than X [John has $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} *no \\ some \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ money]].

COMPLEMENT SUBJECT
DELETION AND SUBSET
RELATIONS
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It has been pointed out by various writers that certain verbs require that the subjects of their complements be identical to their own subjects. An example of such a verb is *try*: *I tried to kill Sam* and *I tried killing Sam*, but **I tried for Bill to kill Sam* and **I tried Bill's killing Sam*. There are other verbs which require unlike subjects in their complements (Perlmutter 1968). To my knowledge, however, verbs which permit both identical and nonidentical complement subjects to be *deleted* have not been discussed. Compare the following examples:

- (1) I tried drinking tepid tea.
- (2) I regretted killing Sam.

Whereas (1) must be interpreted as having the deep structure subject *I* in the complement sentence, (2) can be interpreted as having either a deep structure subject *I* or a deep structure subject *we* in the complement sentence. Another example of the sort of phenomenon shown by (2) is provided by (3):

- (3) I advocated killing Sam.