



More on -ER- Globality

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MORE ON *-ER-* GLOBALITY*

If viewed superficially, one might think that the two sentences in (1) were identical.

- (1) a. Slim was more tipsy than Tex.
- b. Slim was more tipsy than obliterated.

That they are not is suggested by the often-noted fact that for many idiolects, only the first of these sentences has an *-er* form.

- (2) a. Slim was tipsier than Tex.
- b. *Slim was tipsier than obliterated.

What explains this asymmetry?

The explanation I would advance is the following. While it makes a kind of rough-hewn sense to say of (1a)–(2a) that it is tipsy that “is being compared” (that is, that these sentences come from a remote structure which also underlies (3) [Here I will attempt no justification of this analysis, which was first proposed by Postal]),

- (3) The degree to which Slim was tipsy exceeds the degree to which Tex was tipsy.

the so-called “compared element” of (1b) does not even appear in surface structure. I would suggest that this structure derives from the same remote structure that underlies (in all for the present discussion relevant properties) the sentences in (4).

- (4) a. It is more $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{appropriate} \\ \text{true} \\ \text{accurate} \\ \text{etc.} \end{array} \right\}$ to say that Slim was tipsy

than it is to say that he was obliterated.

- b. The degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that Slim was tipsy exceeds the degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that he was obliterated.

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That is, logically, in (1b), the compared element, despite appearances, is not *tipsy*, but rather the appropriateness of making one predication (*Slim is tipsy*) as opposed to another (*Slim is obliterated*).

My suggestion for an explanation of the puzzling *(1b) is to make the extremely low-level *more* → *-er* rule global in the now familiar sense of that term. In a homy, but I hope sufficiently clear for this context, way, we might say that *more* can only suffix to an adjective that it “modifies” in logical structure.

Support for this formulation can be derived from the fact that the second sentence in (1) can appear with adjectives in place of *tipsy* that do not admit of degree modification, such as those in (5).

- (5) a. *Alchemists Anonymous is $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{very} \\ \text{too} \\ \text{fabulously} \end{array} \right\}$ defunct.
- b. *The Rive Gauche is $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{highly} \\ \text{sufficiently} \\ \text{somewhat} \end{array} \right\}$ opposite from
the Rive Droite.

The general rule, that only degreeable predicates can be compared (cf. the contrasts in (6) and (7)),

- (6) a. *Alchemists Anonymous is more defunct than Lysenkovians Anonymous.
b. Alchemists Anonymous is more defunct than moribund.
- (7) a. *The Rive Gauche is more opposite from the Rive Droite than the Rive Centrale.
b. The Rive Gauche is more opposite from the Rive Droite than adjacent to it.

can be maintained without exception only as long as one looks below the surface of such sentences as (1b), (6b) and (7b) to sources for these sentences like those suggested by (4), and only, incidentally, if such rules as a rule which only converts *more* to *-er* under semantic conditions are made available in the theory of grammar.

MIT

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