

Problematising the typology of comparison: The lexicalisation of implicit comparison  
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Comparison is frequently expressed with morphosyntactic constructions that are more marked than the associated positive concept (Jakobson 1971, Bobaljik 2012). For example, English has the comparative *taller*, compared to the positive *tall*, and variants of this markedness pattern are not uncommon. This poster discusses and accounts for instances in which the comparative is instead less marked than the positive, focusing on Bumthang, a Tibeto-Burman language of Bhutan (cf van Driem 2015), as seen in (1).

The morphologically unmarked forms of property concepts in Bumthang necessarily have a comparative interpretation, which is not as surprising as we might expect. The use of any gradable property concept includes, at least pragmatically, comparison to an entity that does not meet the criteria for description by that property concept: nothing is *cheap* without something else being *expensive*, for instance (2). This is because gradable property concepts are conceptualised with ‘cut-off points’, as represented in (3): some things are not tall, some things are not cheap.

Languages of the world commonly express comparison explicitly (Stassen 1985). This may involve markers of the standard (e.g. *taller than*) or degree markers modifying the property, as above. However, many languages of Australia, Melanesia and the Americas encode comparison with conjunct strategies that implicitly encode this concept (Stassen 2013, Schapper and de Vries 2018; (4)). In Bumthang, where comparison is encoded in the lexicalisation of property concepts ((1)), implicit comparison is found in a sole clause without the use of a conjunct strategy. This implies that the field of reference for property concepts in Bumthang includes entities that do not meet the criteria for description by that property concept – i.e. asserting that something is *tall* or *taller* makes covert reference to things which are not – in contrast to more commonly discussed strategies involving comparison.

The implicit comparison found in Bumthang shows that the field of reference beyond the domain of the property itself is a potential variable at play in the typology of comparison, since the field of reference may include entities that fail to meet the cut-off point for description by the property concept. This is schematised in (3), where Bumthang includes the left-hand part of the figure in its lexicalisation, as opposed to languages like English, where that domain is only included pragmatically.

The data force us to reconsider the typology of comparative constructions. A cross-linguistic study should include the morphosyntax of the predicate as well as the standard, and also incorporate a more nuanced understanding of the semantics encoded in property concept lexemes.

## Examples

- Bumthang (Tibeto-Burman)
- (1) a. *Banggala ngundi réng-za.*  
chilli green longer-IPFV  
'The green chilli is longer.'
- (1) b. *Banggala ngundi ringshing nak-sa.*  
chilli green long COP-IPFV  
'The green chilli is long.'
- English (Indo-European)
- (2) *\$18 is **cheap**. ... This is a huge, huge deal ... that the parents spent THOUSANDS of dollars on (even for a less expensive bar mitzvah).*  
(<http://www.durbanmom.com/jforum/posts/list/306728.page>, cited in iWeb 2018)



Figure 1: Schema of gradable property concepts

- Ternate (North Halmahera)
- (4) *Irwan **lamo**; Sarmin ici*  
Irwan big Sarmin small  
'Irwan is bigger than Sarmin.'  
(Hayami-Allen 2001:182, cited in Schapper and de Vries 2018)

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