

On the Parametric Variation of Deletion in Comparatives

The aim of the paper is to refute the assumptions prevalent in the literature on Comparative Deletion (CD) and Comparative Ellipsis (CE) in comparatives and to provide an alternative solution placing CD and CE into a radically new perspective, within a generative framework, more precisely Principles and Parameters Theory. Traditional analyses consider CD to be universally principled, separating it from other deletion phenomena, such as CE, and defining it on the basis of its being obligatory. Based on cross-linguistic data, I will show that CD is subject to parametric variation and instead of describing it by virtue of its obligatoriness, I propose a functional definition based on the target site of CD, which may be better applied when accounting for the parametric variation in the comparative subclause.

The derivation of comparative constructions is traditionally claimed to involve an obligatory deletion process called Comparative Deletion (CD) and optionally also an operation called Comparative Ellipsis (CE). CD is responsible for eliminating an adjectival, adverbial or nominal constituent from the comparative subclause (Kennedy–Merchant 2000; Kennedy to appear;) in examples such as (1a)–(1c), respectively:

- (1a) Mary is taller than Peter is _____{CD}. (_____{CD} = x-tall)
(1b) The tiger ran faster than the man drove _____{CD}. (_____{CD} = x-fast)
(1c) Susan has more cats than Peter has _____{CD}. (_____{CD} = x-many cats)

CE may delete other elements from the subclause, resulting in structures like (2):

- (2) Mary is taller than Peter _____{CE} _____{CD}. (_____{CE} = is; _____{CD} = x-tall)

According to the standard assumptions, the distinction between CD and CE lies fundamentally in CD universally being the obligatory process in comparatives (Kennedy 2002; Lechner 1999, 2004; Bresnan 1973, 1975) and parametric setting would thus be reduced to the extent of CE. Languages, then, are invariably claimed to have [+ CD], meaning that CD is obligatory, and [– CE], meaning that CE is optional.

However, cross-linguistic data show that the application of CD and CE is much more complex and they are not independent from each other. First, CD is not obligatory in all languages, which refutes the idea that CD would be a process solely determined by a universal principle. The example is from Hungarian:

- (3) Többször etettem macskát, mint **ahányszor** Péter malacot fürdetett.
more.often fed-I cat-Acc. than **x-often** Peter pig-Acc. bathed
'I fed cats more often than Peter bathed pigs.'

This suggests that there are languages with [+ CD], and languages with [– CD]. But parametric setting is not solely on the basis of the [+/- CD] feature, i.e. with languages having either obligatory or optional CD but an invariably optional CE. In Italian clausal comparatives introduced by *che* (the Italian counterpart of English *than*), not only CD but also CE is obligatory, proving that parametric variation is also subject to a [+/- CE] feature, resulting in the possibility of [+ CD] and [+ CE], as in Italian. In the following example, the finite verb in the subclause must be deleted in order to produce a grammatical structure:

- (4a) *Luisa ama più Pietro _____{CD} che ami Giorgio.
Luisa loves more Peter that loves-Subj. George
'Luisa loves Peter more than she loves George.'
(4b) Luisa ama più Pietro _____{CD} che _____{CE} Giorgio.
Luisa loves more Peter that George
'Luisa loves Peter more than she loves George.'

Besides the existence of both a [+/- CD] and a [+/- CE] feature, the interaction of the two processes is important to mention. Hungarian data show that the application of CD may in some cases require CE for the structure to converge; taking the example in (3), if we apply only CD in the subclause, the result is ungrammatical:

- (5) *Többször etettem macskát, mint _____{CD} Péter malacot fürdetett.
 more.often fed-I cat-Acc. than Peter pig-Acc. bathed
 ‘I fed cats more often than Peter bathed pigs.’

If, however, we apply CE as well and thus delete the finite verb, the sentence is again grammatical:

- (6) Többször etettem macskát, mint _____{CD} Péter malacot _____{CE}.
 more.often fed-I cat-Acc. than Peter pig-Acc.
 ‘I fed cats more often than Peter fed pigs.’

This shows that CE is not purely optional but its application is actually dependent on that of CD, resulting in structures where CD triggers the elimination of the finite verb as well, even though the language seems to be [- CE], as shown by the grammaticality of (3).

Based on all these, I claim that CD and CE are processes not determined by universal principles but by parameters. Therefore, instead of saying that CD would be an obligatory operation eliminating an adjectival, adverbial or nominal constituent from the comparative subclause, I propose that CD should be considered as an operation eliminating the functionally extended AP (see Corver 1990, 1997) from the comparative subclause, if that AP is identical with the one in the matrix clause. CD may be obligatory in certain languages (e.g. in English) but may be subject to rather different and complex restrictions in others, such as in Hungarian. Any other deletion is to be viewed as an instance of CE, which is again more complex than being always optional in all languages and thus the final grammatical structure of the comparative subclause is dependent on the interrelation of the two processes rather than the result of the application of a single, universal mechanism.

My talk will present and explain this complexity of parametric settings in detail.

Selected bibliography:

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