

# The Cognitive Patterns of Construals in Comparatives

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## 0. Aim

This paper aims to clarify the possible semantic diversity of the comparative constructions in English and Japanese within the framework of Construction Grammar (Lakoff 1987; Fillmore et al. 1988; Kay 1990; Goldberg 1995; Kay and Fillmore 1999; Croft 2001; Croft and Cruse 2004; Ostman and Mirjam 2005 etc...).

I will focus on the following two points: (i) idiomatic comparative constructions play an important role in capturing the possible semantic diversity of comparative constructions, (ii) the semantics of each comparative construction can be determined by the combination of a small number of semantically motivated parameters.

Let us assume here that the ‘comparative constructions’ can be defined as follows:

- (1) Definition: A construction is a comparative construction if two objects, events, or propositions in the construction are explicitly compared on a single scale.**

The above definition automatically excludes constructions such as the superlative (ex. *John is the tallest boy in the class*) and the “positive” (ex. *John is tall*), which some scholars regard as belonging to the comparative construction (Ulta 1972: 120; Andersen 1983:100). In the superlative construction, at least three objects are compared on a scale, while in the positive, the standard of a comparison is implicit, rather than explicit.

There are many idiomatic comparative constructions in English and Japanese whose form, meaning or function are different from those of the ordinary comparative construction<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Ordinary’ comparative construction can be defined as a construction in which two objects or individuals (typically expressed in the form of NPs) are graded against each other on a scale of attribute (ie. a scale in the case of adjectives or adverbs), as exemplified in (i) and (ii):

(i) Tom is smart-er than Jim. (English)

(ii) Taro wa Hanako yori kasikoi. (Japanese)

Taro Topic Hanako marker of standard smart

‘Taro is smarter than Jim.’

Notice that (i) and (ii) are examples of comparison of superiority. There are also examples of ‘comparison of equality’ (*as...as*) type in the ordinary comparative construction:



or ‘individuals’ (typically expressed in the form of NPs) are graded against each other (ex. *John is taller than Mary.*) and not to seriously consider the idiomatic comparative constructions.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I will consider the diversity of the semantics of comparative constructions through the detailed investigation of idiomatic comparative constructions within the framework of Construction Grammar.<sup>3</sup>

The reason I take idiomatic comparative constructions into consideration is that they have cognitive functional characteristics that are unique to the particular construction and play an important role in considering the fundamental question of “how many ways do we have to linguistically encode the relative position between two things, events, or propositions?” In order to capture the entire picture of the semantics of comparative constructions, the idiomatic comparative constructions are central, far from being peripheral.

I will introduce two parameters which are semantically motivated:

- (12) The parameter of axis: (i) comparison in terms of degree of attribute (adjective, adverb)  
(ii) comparison in terms of modality

The parameter of construal: (A) neutral comparison

(B) non-neutral comparison

These parameters play an important role in capturing the semantic diversity of the comparative construction in English and Japanese. I will argue that the semantics of each construction can be determined by the interaction between the two semantically motivated parameters. (As I will discuss later, there are sub categories in the parameter.)

## 1. Various idiomatic comparative constructions in English and Japanese

Before embarking on the possible semantic diversity of the comparative construction, let us examine the idiomatic comparative constructions in English and Japanese one by one.

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<sup>2</sup> Stassen (1985: 25-26) states its reason as follows: “The reason for this discussion is entirely practical; whereas all grammars of the languages in the sample indicate the way in which NP-comparatives are formed, they do not, in general, provide for sufficiently reliable data on constructions in which other elements (i.e. adjective, verbs or clauses) are involved.” Thus, the prototypical sentence for his investigation is a sentence as in (i), not as in (ii):

- (i) English  
a. The tree is taller than the house.  
b. I like Pamela better than Lucy.  
(ii) English  
a. The general was more cunning than brave.  
b. The team plays better than last year.  
c. The president is smaller than you think.

Stassen (1985:26)

<sup>3</sup> The basic assumption of Construction Grammar is as follows:

- (i) Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as “some aspect of its form and function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist (Goldberg 1995:5, 2003).  
(ii) Construction Grammar assumes that **meaning** is understood in a broad sense that includes lexical semantics, pragmatics, discourse structure, and frame semantics.  
(iii) Construction Grammar does not posit the dichotomy of ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ in linguistic knowledge

## 1. 1. The *no more...than* construction in English

### 1.1.1. Syntactic characteristics of the *no more...than* construction

There are some syntactic characteristics that are unique to the construction. First, the construction must occur in the form of positive degree, but not in the form of comparative degree (i.e. *taller*), as in:

(13) Tom is no more tall than Richard.

(14) Tom is no taller than Richard.

Second, *more* in this construction functions as a ‘sentence-modifying adverb’, rather than a word-modifying one. Therefore, various kinds of grammatical category can occur after *more* in this construction as shown in (15)-(18):

(15) He’d no more marry for money than I would. (VP)

(16) A whole is no more a fish than a horse is. (NP)

(17) Tom is no more fond of music than Jim. (AP)

(18) The horses were no more on parade than was their driver. (PP)

Third, what is called comparative deletion is optional in *no more/no less...than* constructions, whereas it is obligatory in the ordinary comparative:

(19) A tent is no more natural to us than a cage is (natural) to an eagle.

(20) This explanation is more natural than that one is (\*natural).

The deletion of the adjective, *natural* in the case of (19) is optional, while it is obligatory in the case of (20)<sup>4</sup>.

### 1.1.2. The semantics of the *no more...than* construction

Semantically, the two propositions of the *no more...than* construction are compared on a scale of likelihood. That is to say, in (13) the comparative proposition “Richard is tall” is construed as being on a low level (almost zero) in the scale of likelihood of proposition and the main proposition “Tom is tall” is downgraded to the same level.<sup>5</sup> This is shown by the following constraint:

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<sup>4</sup> See Bresnan (1973) for further the discussion on ‘comparative deletion’.

<sup>5</sup> According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1133), “*more* in this construction is in modifier function, but the usual degree meaning has effectively been lost”. Quirk et al. (1985:1136) also state that “the rhetorical effect of the construction (=no more...than) is not so much to make a comparison as to intensify the negation.”



In (24), Speaker B objects to the appropriateness of Speaker A's utterance and insists that Tom is not a genius by using the *no more...than* construction.

We can safely conclude from this observation that the two constructions have a conventionalized speech act function of 'objection to the previous utterance.' It is important to notice that this speech act function does not exist in the regular comparative construction.

### 1.2. The *no less...than* construction in English

The *no less...than* construction semantically behaves like the 'opposite' of the *no more...than* construction:

(25) Tom is no less a genius than Susan.

In (25) "Susan is a genius" is construed as being on a high level on the scale of likelihood and the main proposition "Tom is a genius" is upgraded to the same level. Because of the cognitive constraint of 'high' construal, the sentence of the *no less...than* construction becomes odd if the proposition of the comparative clause is unlikely:

(26) Tom is no less a genius than {Einstein/??George Bush}.

The *no less...than* construction is parallel with the *no more...than* construction in that it has the speech act function of 'objection to the previous utterance' as in:

(27) A: I don't think Tom is a genius.

B: What are you talking about? He is no less a genius than Einstein.

However, the *no less...than* construction does not necessarily have this speech act function, because the construction can be used as the reply to a bare question ('How intelligent is Tom?') as in:

(28) A: How intelligent is Tom?

B: He is no less a genius than Einstein.

### 1.3. The *may/might (just) as well* construction in English

The *may/might as well* is a multifunctional comparative construction which is closely related to modality or the speaker's attitude toward propositional content ( Mitchell 2003; Sawada 2005 ) :



construction is not literally understood as the conditional construction, but rather construed as the comparative construction. That is to say, ‘*suru kurai-nara*’ can be regarded as the marker of the standard of comparison, not the marker of conditional. This is mainly because speakers use this construction only when he or she chooses between two alternative events.

### 1.5. The *compared to NP, S* construction in English

The *compared to NP, S* construction is semantically different from the ordinary comparative construction as in:

- (33) a. Compared to Tom, Sam is tall.  
 b. Sam is taller than Tom. (≠a)

(33a) has an implication that the two elements are compared non-neutrally: (33a) implies Tom and Sam are not tall. This is because in the ‘*compared to NP, S*’ construction, there is a cognitive constraint that the NP (=Tom) of the comparative (or conditional) clause must be construed as low on the scale of the attribute (i.e. tallness).

### 1.6. The *ni kurabe-tara, S* and the *ni kurabe-te, S* construction in Japanese

Next, let us consider the ‘*ni kurabe-tara*’ construction in Japanese:

- (34) Taro ni kurabe- tara Jiro wa kasikoi.  
 Taro to compare conditional Jiro Top intelligent  
 ‘Compared with Taro, Jiro is intelligent.’

The *ni kurabe-tara* construction also has an inference that the two elements are compared non-neutrally: in (34), Taro and Jiro are compared based on the presumption that they are not intelligent, because in the ‘...*ni kurabetara*’ construction, there is a cognitive constraint that the NP (=Taro) of the comparative (or conditional) clause must be construed as low on the scale of the attribute (i.e. intelligence).

Notice that the *ni kurabe-te* construction is a ‘neutral’ comparative construction unlike the *nikurabe tara* construction:

- (35) a. [Neko wa [nezumi ni kurabe- tara ] kasikoi]. (*ni kurabe-tara*)  
 Cat Top rat to compare conditional smart  
 ‘Compared with a rat, a cat is wise.’  
 b. [Neko wa [nezumi ni kurabe- te ] kasikoi]. (*ni kurabe-te*)  
 Cat Top rat to compare clause link smart  
 ‘A cat is smarter than a rat.’

In (35a), a rat is construed as low in intelligence, while, in (35b) there is not such meaning. In other words, in (35b), but not in (35a), the two animals are compared neutrally on the scale of intelligence.

### 1.7. The *makezu otorazu* construction in Japanese

In the Japanese *makezu otorazu* construction two objects are compared on a scale of attribute equally, but there is a cognitive constraint that the two objects are construed as high on the scale:

- (36) Hanako wa Yoshiko ni [make-zu ota- zu] se ga takai.  
Hanako Top Yoshiko to lose not inferior not height Nom tall  
'Hanako is no less tall than Yoshiko.'

In (36) both Hanako and Yoshiko are construed as high on the scale of height. If the standard of comparison in the sentence is an 'elementary school student', the sentence will sound odd:

- (37)?? Hanako wa syoogaku- sei ni [make-zu ota- zu] se ga takai.  
Hanako Top elementary school student to lose not inferior not height Nom tall  
'Hanako is no less tall than an elementary school student.'

Notice that sentence (37) will be felicitous if the speaker says the utterance from a baby's perspective.

### 1.8. The metalinguistic comparative construction in English and Japanese

The following examples can be considered as metalinguistic comparatives (Pinkham 1985: 150; McCawley 1988:673)

- (38) John is more stupid than ignorant.

- (39) Mary more respects than admires John.

(McCawley 1988:673)

As McCawley (1988:673) argues, (38) and (39) refer "not to the degree to which John is stupid or the amount of respect that Mary has for John but rather to the degree to which it is correct to say that John is stupid, that Mary respects John, etc." As McCawley (1988: 673) argues, in the metalinguistic comparative construction non-degree adjectives can appear as in (40), and the propositions which are themselves comparative can be compared as in (41):

- (40) Your problems are more financial than legal.

- (41) John just had better luck than his rivals more than he was actually superior to them.

(McCawley 1988:673)

The *to iu yori (wa)* construction in Japanese also belongs to the metalinguistic comparative construction, because the construction doesn't refer to any degree of "scholariness" at all, as in (42):

- (42) Taro wa sennsei to iu yori gakusya da.  
 Taro Top teacher as say than scholar Pred  
 'Taro is more a scholar than a teacher.'

**2. The possible semantic diversity of the comparative construction (tentative version)**

This section argues that the analysis of the idiosyncratic comparative constructions enables us to clarify the possible distributional patterns of comparative constructions in language: each construction has its own construction-specific characteristics depending on its value for the following four semantic features on the basis of two parameters (i.e. (i), (ii), (A), and (B)):

(43) (Tentative version)

The parameter of axis: (i) comparison in terms of the degree of attribute (adjective, adverb)/

(ii) comparison in terms of modality

The parameter of construal: (A) neutral comparison/ (B) non-neutral comparison

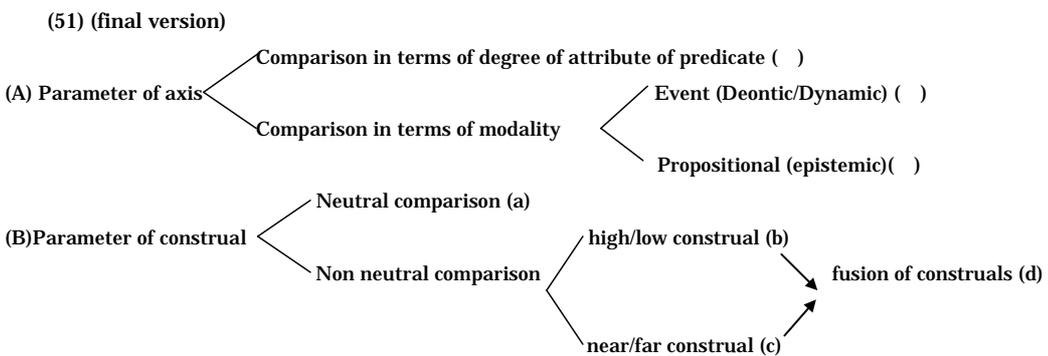


Figure 4

	( ) Comparison in terms of the degree of attribute (adjective, adverb)	( ) Comparison in terms of modality
(A) Neutral comparison	Type 1	Type 2
(B) Non-neutral comparison	Type 3	Type 4

Figure 5

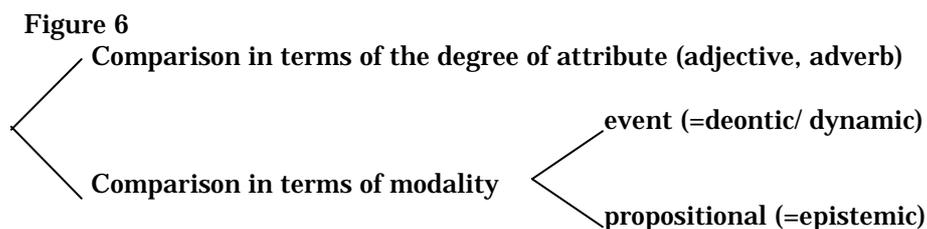
Type 1	The ordinary comparative construction in English and Japanese The <i>ni kurabe-te</i> construction (section 1.7)
Type 2	The “metalinguistic comparative” construction in English and Japanese (section 1.8)
Type 3	The <i>makezu otorazu</i> construction (section 1.3), The <i>compared to NP</i> construction (section 1.6), the <i>ni kurabe-tara</i> construction (section 1.7)
Type 4	The <i>no more...than</i> construction (section 1.1), <i>no less...than</i> construction (section 1.2), the <i>might as well</i> construction (section , V <i>suru kurainara</i> construction, <i>make-zu ota-zu</i> construction,

The ordinary comparative constructions (e.g. ‘-er than’ in English, or ‘...yori’ in Japanese) have the features (i) and (A) (=Type1). The metalinguistic comparative construction in English and Japanese has the features (ii) and (A) (=Type 2). The English *compared to NP* construction and the Japanese ‘*ni kurabetara*’ constructions have the features (i) and (B) (=Type 3). Finally, the *no more...than* and *might as well* construction have the features (ii) and ( B ) (=Type 4).

### 3. Subcategories of the two parameters

The above parameters in (43) are highly abstract. It is possible to subcategorize them into more concrete ones.

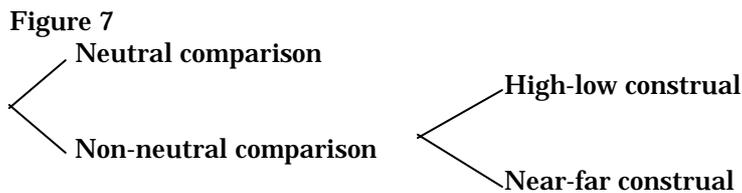
First, ‘comparison in terms of modality’ can be subcategorized into ‘comparison in terms of propositional modality’ and ‘comparison in terms of event modality.’ (Palmer 1990, 2001; Sweetser 1990 ) as shown in the following figure 6:



For example, as we have discussed in section 1.4 the might as well construction is polysemous in that it expresses both ‘event modality’ and ‘propositional modality’, as in (44) and (45), respectively:

- (44) You might just as well ask for the moon as for a bicycle. (=31)  
 (45) You might just as well give that old coat to Jim as throw it away. (=32)

Second, ‘non-neutral comparison’ can be subcategorized into ‘high/low construal’ and ‘near/far construal’ as shown in the following figure 7:



For example, the *no more...than* construction considered in section 1.1 receives a low construal construction and the *no less...than* construction considered in section 1.2 receives a high construal construction. The dimension of near/far construal is concerned with the degree of distance between two objects, events, or propositions. Therefore, it only applies to the ‘non-equality’ comparative construction. For example, the *no match for* construction in English and the *asimoto nimo oyoanai* construction in Japanese represent the ‘far’ construal:

- (46) (The *no match for* construction)  
 Tom is no match for Jim in strength. (Tom < Jim)  
 ‘far’
- (47) (The *not compare with* construction (English))  
 Mary’s skill of tennis does not compare with Susan’s. (Mary<Susan)  
 ‘far’
- (48) (The *asimoto nimo oyobanai* construction)  
 Taro no tikara wa Ziro no asimoto nimo oyoba-nai. (Taro<Ziro)  
 Taro Gen strength Top Ziro gen foot to even up to-not ‘far’  
 ‘Taro is no match for Ziro in strength.’

Interestingly, there seem to be no comparative constructions in Japanese and English in which ‘near’ construal is inherent. Of course, it is possible to express such a construal by combining degree adverbs such as *slightly* as in the following example:

- (49) That mountain is *slightly* higher than this one. (near construal)

**4. Fusion of the two types of construal ('high-low' construal and 'near-far' construal)**

Interestingly, there are comparative constructions in English and Japanese which express both high/low construal and near/far construal simultaneously.

**4.1. The *hi de wa nai* construction in Japanese**

In the *hi de wa nai* construction, the subject of the construction (Taro) is even far higher than the standard of comparison (Jiro) on the scale of the skill of tennis, as in (50):

(50) Taro no tennis no udemae wa Jiro no hi dewa nai.  
 Taro Gen tennis Gen skill Top Jiro Gen ratio is not  
 'Jiro's skill of tennis does not compared with Taro's (although they are both good tennis players)' (Taro>Jiro 'far' + 'high')

In (59), Taro and Jiro are construed not only as 'far' but also 'high' on the scale of the skill of tennis.

**5. The possible semantic diversity of the comparative construction (final version)**

From above discussion, it is possible to posit the following revised version of the parameters as shown in (51):

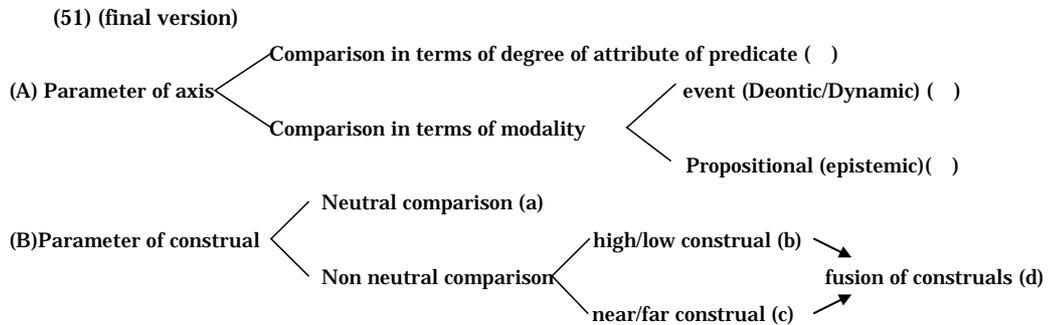


Figure 8

	( ) Comparison in terms of the degree of attribute (adjective, adverb)	( ) comparison in terms of 'event' Modality	( ) comparison in terms of 'propositional' modality
a. neutral construal	Semantic type 1	Semantic type 2	Semantic type 3
b. 'high/low' construal	Semantic type 4	Semantic type 5	Semantic type 6
c. 'near/far' construal	Semantic type 7 <i>Only 'far' construal constructions in English and Japanese</i>	Semantic type 8 <i>No constructions in English and Japanese</i>	Semantic type 9 <i>No constructions in English and Japanese</i>
d. fusion of 'high/low' construal and 'near/far' construal	Semantic type 10	Semantic type 11 <i>No constructions in English and Japanese</i>	Semantic type 12 <i>No construction in English and Japanese</i>

Figure 9 <type> <instance>

Semantic Type 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ordinary comparative construction ('<i>er...than</i>,'<i>as...as</i>' in English),('yori' in Japanese)</li> <li>• The <i>ni kurabe-te</i> construction (JP)</li> </ul>
Semantic type 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>would rather...than</i> construction (Eng)</li> </ul>
Semantic Type 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• meta linguistic comparative construction (Eng, JP)</li> </ul>
Semantic Type 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>makezu otorazu</i> construction (JP) (+high)</li> <li>• The <i>ni kurabe-tara</i> construction (JP) (+low)</li> </ul>
Semantic Type 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>might as well</i> construction (deontic type) (Eng) (+low)</li> <li>• The <i>suru kurai-nara</i> construction (JP) (+low)</li> </ul>
Semantic Type 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>might as well</i> construction (epistemic type) (Eng) (+low)</li> <li>• The <i>no more...than</i> construction (Eng) (+low)</li> <li>• The <i>no less...than</i> construction (Eng) (+high)</li> </ul>
Semantic Type 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>no match for</i> construction (Eng) (+far)</li> <li>• The <i>cannot compare with</i> construction (Eng) (+far) (No <i>near</i> construal)</li> <li>• The <i>asimoto ni oyobanai</i> construction (JP) (+far)</li> </ul>
Semantic Type 8	No comparative construction in English and Japanese
Semantic Type 9	No comparative construction in English and Japanese
Semantic Type 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>hi de wa nai</i> construction (JP)(+high, +far)</li> </ul>
Semantic Type 11	No comparative construction in English and Japanese
Semantic Type 12	No comparative construction in English and Japanese

From the above figure 9, it is possible to notice that there are no such constructions as semantic type 8, 9, 11, and 12 as far as English and Japanese are concerned. However, there can be the constructions in other languages other than English and Japanese.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the comparative constructions in English and Japanese whose form and meaning are different from ordinary comparative constructions and has analyzed the semantic

diversity of comparative constructions. I have argued that the semantic property of each construction can be determined by the interaction between the two semantically motivated parameters.

The proposed analysis is possible only when we take the position that (i) constructions (form-meaning pairing) are the primitive units of syntactic representation and (ii) there is no essential distinction between the core and periphery in language.

According to the combination of the parameters in (51), we can get 12 kinds of comparative constructions as shown in Figure 8. However, there are no constructions such as semantic types 8, 9, 11, and 12 as far as English and Japanese are concerned. The analysis in this paper enables us to get the following observations:

(52) There are no comparative constructions in English and Japanese in which **near** construal is inherent (although there are comparative constructions in English and Japanese in which **far** construal is inherent, as shown in type 10).

(53) There are no **modal comparative** constructions in English and Japanese in which near/far construal is inherent. This implied that there are no types such as type 11 and type 12, which are fusional constructions between high/ low and far/ near construals.

I would like to leave for future study the problem of explaining where these observations come from.

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