

# The cognitive characteristics of the idiomatic comparative constructions: the case of the *no more/less...than* constructions

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## Abstract

The *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions have syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics that are unique to them. This paper offers a principled explanation of various characteristics of these constructions within the framework of Construction Grammar and Cognitive linguistics. I argue that the cognitive process of ‘scalar construal’ plays an important role in capturing the semantics of the constructions.

Construction Grammar and Cognitive Grammar reject the idea of ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ dichotomy in language that the generative approach assumes. The *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions demonstrates the validity of a construction-based approach to language.

## 0. Introductions

The aim of this paper is to offer a principled explanation of the characteristics of the *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions in English within the frameworks of cognitive linguistics and Construction Grammar. (Fillmore et al. 1988; Langacker 1987; Goldberg 1995; Kay and Fillmore 1999; Sawada 2003, 2004; Croft and Cruse 2004 etc). These two constructions have syntactic, semantic and pragmatic characteristics that are unique to the particular constructions. Observe the following examples: <sup>1</sup>

- (1) He’s no more fit to be a priest than I am!  
(Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)
- (2) The vistas on this route are no less impressive than the first one.  
(British National Corpus 1274)

(1) is interpreted as ‘he isn’t fit to be a priest, just as I am not fit to be a priest.’ <sup>2</sup> (2) is interpreted as ‘the vistas on this route are impressive just as the first one, which are regarded as very impressive.’ What makes them to be interpreted like this?

In this paper I will focus on the following four points. First, I will point out several syntactic characteristics of these constructions. Second, I will offer a cognitive explanation of these constructions. Third, I will discuss the difference between the relative comparison and the absolute comparison. Finally, I will clarify the speech act function of these constructions.

## 1. Syntactic characteristics of the *no more ...than* and *no less...than* constructions

First, when adjectives or adverbs are used in the *no more/no less...than* construction, they must occur in the form of positive degree, but not in the form of comparative degree. This contrasts strikingly with the case of normal comparatives, in which the adjectives or adverbs must occur in the form of comparative degree, e.g. *-er* form:

- (3) Tom is no more tall than Richard.
- (4) \*Tom is no taller than Richard.

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<sup>1</sup> The *no more...than* construction is widely known as the ‘whale construction’ in English education in Japan. (e.g. *A whale is no more a fish than a horse is.*)

<sup>2</sup> According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1133), “*more* in this construction (=6b) is in modifier function, but the usual degree meaning has effectively been lost”. Quirk et al. (1985:1136) also states that “the rhetorical effect of the construction (=no more...than) is not so much to make a comparison as to intensify the negation.”

Second, idiomatic meanings of *no more/no less...than* constructions arise only when ‘more’ and ‘less’ in the constructions function as adverbs (Quirk et al. 1985:1136). The following example is regarded as a non-idiomatic, compositional sentence because ‘more’ functions as an adjective:

(5) Paul has no more friends than I have. (Quirk et al. 1985 :1136)

Third, *more* and *less* in these constructions function as ‘sentence-modifying adverbs’, but not as word-modifying ones. Therefore, all kinds of lexical category can occur after *more* and *less* in these constructions:

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

VP

(7) A whole is no less a mammal than a horse is.

NP

(8) She is no less beautiful than her mother.

Adj

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

PP

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

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

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

The deletion of the adjective, *natural* in the case of (10) is optional, while it is obligatory in the case of (11)<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. The cognitive semantics of the two constructions

In Cognitive Grammar “meaning is equated with conceptualization (Langacker 1987: 5).” The very wording that we choose in order to linguistically encode a situation rests on the manner in which the situation has been mentally construed (Langacker 1987:5; Taylor 2002). In the following sections I will offer a principled explanation of the characteristics of the *no more/no less...than* constructions from the viewpoint of construal.

### 2.1 The case of the *no more...than* construction

Let us consider the example of the following *no more...than* construction:

(12) A whale is no more a fish than a horse is.

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1133), “*more* in this construction is in modifier function, but the usual degree meaning has effectively been lost”. It is crucial that in (12) a comparison is made between two propositions and that the standard of the comparison is the ‘likelihood of the propositions’, not the degree of ‘fishness.’ That is to say, in (12) the first proposition, ‘a whale is a fish’ and the second proposition, ‘a horse is a fish’ are compared in the scale of likelihood.

Notice that the second proposition in the construction must always be construed as the lowest in the scale of likelihood and the first proposition must be lowered down to the level of the second proposition. Let us apply this analysis to sentence (12). In (12) it is presupposed that the second proposition, ‘a horse is a fish’ is construed as zero in likelihood. Based on this presupposition, the speaker of (12) states that the proposition of ‘a whale is a fish’ is at the same level as the second proposition.

Let us compare the following ordinary comparative construction and *no more...than*

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<sup>3</sup> See Bresnan (1973) for further the discussion on ‘comparative deletion’.

construction:

- (13) a. John is not more courageous than Tom.
- b. John is no more courageous than Tom.

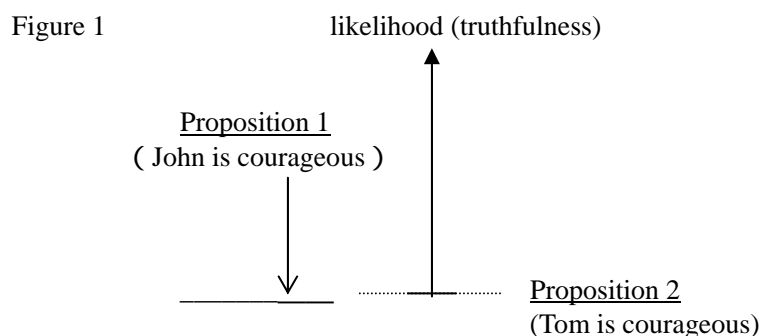
Although both sentences express that the level of one thing is not higher than the level of another thing, they are completely different in the following two points. The first point is the difference of the standard of comparison. In the case of the regular comparative construction (=13a), the standard of comparison is ‘courageousness.’ On the other hand, in the case of the *no more...than* construction, the standard of the comparison is the scale of ‘likelihood of propositions.’

The second difference is concerned with presupposition: whereas there is no presupposition in the comparative clause in the standard comparative construction, in the case of the *no more...than* construction, however, there is a presupposition that the proposition in the comparative clause is construed as the lowest in the scale of likelihood.

This is shown by the following constraint:

- (14) The cognitive constraint of the *no more...than* construction : In the *no more...than* construction, the likelihood of the proposition in the comparative clause (p2) must be construed as the lower end (zero percent) of the scale of likelihood and the likelihood of the proposition in the main clause (p1) must be down graded at the same level as p2.

The reason why the comparative clause of this construction must be construed as “negative” can be explained by this cognitive constraint. The following figure shows the cognitive process of the *no more...than* construction.



The following examples are odd because they conflict with the cognitive constraint in (14):

- (15) ??He is no more a genius than Einstein.
- (16) ??He is no more strong than Superman.

The propositions of comparative clause in (15) and (16), “Einstein is a genius.” and “Superman is strong.” are highly likely according to our encyclopedic knowledge. Therefore, these sentences violate the cognitive constraint in (14). The important fact is that judgments about particular sentence are grounded firmly on our everyday experience of relevant situations rather than on some abstract set of rules that refer only to the formal (syntactic) properties of sentences (Lee 2001:77).

One might consider that the *no more...than* construction not only means that the two propositions are at the same level, but also that the first proposition is even lower than the second proposition in the scale, because “no more” means “equal or less”. However, in the *no more...than* construction, there is only an ‘equal’ reading. This is because the proposition in the comparative clause is construed as the most unlikely proposition. Therefore, there is no room for the first proposition to be down-graded lower than the level of the second proposition.

On the other hand, in the case of the ordinary comparative construction, *not more...than*, there are two readings: the “equal” reading and the “less” reading.

(17) Tom is not more intelligent than Mary. (Tom Mary)

(17) can be interpreted as ( ) ‘Tom’s intelligence is at the same level as Mary’s.’ or ( ) ‘Tom is less intelligent than Mary.’

## 2.2 The case of the *no less...than* construction

The *no less...than* construction also has construction-specific characteristics that are quite different from the ordinary comparatives, as shown by (18):

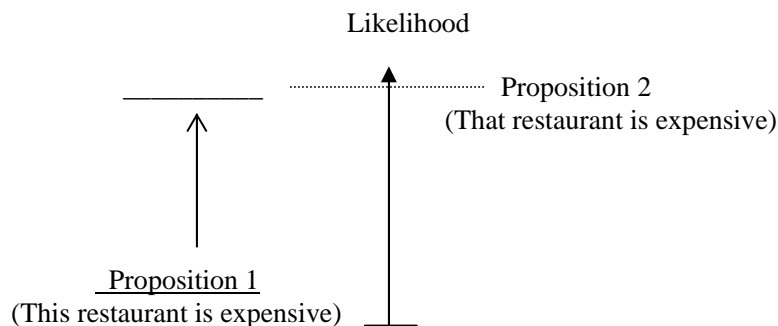
- (18) a. This restaurant is not less expensive than that restaurant.  
 b. This restaurant is no less expensive than that restaurant.

In (18a) we interpret the sentence as a neutral comparison between the degree to which “this restaurant is expensive” and that to which “that restaurant is expensive.” However, (18b) cannot be interpreted as such. (18b) is interpreted as “this restaurant is expensive, just as that one is expensive” Notice that in (18b) the second proposition, ‘that restaurant is expensive’ is construed as the highest in the scale of likelihood. This is shown by the following constraint:

- (19) The cognitive constraint of the *no less...than* construction: In the construction, the likelihood of the proposition in the comparative clause (p2) must be construed as the upper end (100 percent) of a scale of likelihood and the likelihood of the proposition in the main clause (p1) should be upgraded to the same level as p2.

The following figure illustrate the cognitive process of the *no less...than* construction:

Figure 2



The following examples are odd because they violate the cognitive constraint in (19).

- (20) ??A friend is no less important than a stranger (is).  
 (21) ?? A dog is no less fast than a turtle.

According to our encyclopedic knowledge, the proposition of a comparative clause in (20), ‘a stranger is important’ and one in (21), ‘a turtle is fast’ are not construed as likely. Therefore, (20) and (21) violate the cognitive constraint in (19).

The important fact is that the *no less...than* construction only have an interpretation of “equality” unlike the *not less...than* construction:

- (22) She was not less beautiful than her mother. (She her mother)

The regular comparative sentence in (22) is ambiguous: one interpretation is ‘She and her mother were at the same level of beauty.’ The other one is that ‘she was more beautiful than her mother.’ However there is no interpretation of comparison of inequality in the *no less...than* construction. This can be attributed to the fact that the proposition of the comparative clause is construed as 100 percent true and there is no room for the proposition of the main clause to go higher up the scale of

likelihood.

### 3. Relative comparison and absolute comparison

This section will argue that the *no more/less...than* construction is absolute comparison. The regular comparative construction is relative in the sense that there are two ways to linguistically encode the situation according to which of the two entities is the subject of the sentence. The following two sentences are logically (or truth-functionally) the same in meaning:

- (23) a. Bill is not stronger than Mary (is). (Bill Mary)  
b. Mary is not weaker than Bill (is). (Mary Bill)

However, the *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions cannot conceptualize such a situation from two perspectives, because they adopt the absolute viewpoint. Observe the following examples:

- (24) a. Bill is no more strong than Mary (is). (Both are weak)  
b. Mary is no more weak than Bill (is). (Both are strong)

In (24a) and (24b) the propositions in the comparative clause are construed as extremely low (=zero percent) in likelihood. Therefore, in (24a) Bill and Mary are weak, but in (24b), on the other hand, they are strong.

### 4. The *no more/no less...than* constructions as the speech act constructions

This section will consider the speech act function of the *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions. I will argue that these constructions have the special pragmatic function of “objection to the previous utterance.” Observe the following two conversations:

- (25) A: I think Tom is a genius.  
B: What are you talking about? Tom is no more a genius than Bill (is).  
  
(26) A: I think Tom is not a genius.  
B: What are you talking about? Tom is no less a genius than Bill (is).

In (25), the speaker B objects to the appropriateness of the speaker A’s utterance and insists that Tom is not a genius by using *no more...than* construction. Similarly, in (26), the speaker B objects to the appropriateness of the speaker A’s utterance of Tom’s not being a genius and insists that Tom is a genius by using the *no less...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 constructions.

### 5. Conclusion

In this paper we have considered the cognitive and constructional characteristics of the *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions. We can draw the following conclusions from the above consideration:

- (27) In the regular comparative constructions, the standard of comparison is the property of adjectives or adverbs in the sentence. However, in the *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions the standard of comparison is the ‘likelihood’ of the realization of propositions.  
  
(28) In the *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions, the speaker’s construals are inherent. In the *no more...than* construction, the proposition in the comparative clause are construed as lower end in a scale of likelihood, whereas in the *no less...than* construction, it is construed as upper end in a scale of likelihood. In this sense, the *no more...than*

construction and *no less...than* construction are absolute comparison.

- (29) The *no more...than* and the *no less...than* constructions have the special pragmatic function (speech act function) of ‘objecting to the previous utterance.’

Finally, the following examples can be explained naturally by our analysis:

- (30) a. I am more angry than sad.  
b. \*I am angrier than sad.

Notice that (30a), but not (30b), can be paraphrased by (31):

- (31) It is more true to say that I am angry than it is to say that I am sad.

In other words, (30a) shows that the standard of comparison is the ‘likelihood’ of the two propositions.

In the Chomskyan linguistic paradigm (Chomsky 1986, 1995, 2000 etc.), “the focus of investigation has been increasingly restricted to supposedly core grammatical phenomena, i.e. those for which highly general accounts might be viable. The idiosyncratic - and this includes most of what is in the lexicon (and quite a lot of syntax as well) - is restricted to the ‘periphery’ and thus falls outside the scope of serious linguistic theorizing. (Taylor 2002: 9)” According to this generative paradigm, the standard comparative construction is analyzed in syntax component but the *no more...than* / *no less...than* constructions which I have considered in this paper is analyzed in lexicon because of their idiosyncraticity. However, it is important to notice that the *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions are equally highly productive.

Construction Grammar and Cognitive Grammar rejects the idea of syntax/lexicon dichotomy and argue that syntax and lexicon form a continuum. Lexicon and syntax differ merely with respect to the schematicity and internal complexity of the semantic and phonological units that are associated (Taylor 2002:541). The case of *no more...than* and *no less...than* constructions demonstrates the validity of construction based approach to language.

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