

A contrastive study of comparative constructions among English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin: by using corpora in cross-linguistic contrast

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to clarify the functional characteristics of comparative constructions using parallel texts in English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin. The material of this cross-linguistic study is the *New Testament*, and we focus on formal and semantic differences of some comparative factors (comparee, standard marker, and standard) in three languages. Stassen's typological study has shown that there are four types of comparative constructions: locational, exceed, conjoined, and particle. In his classification, Japanese is "locational" and English is "particle." In contrast, Tok Pisin is "exceed" and "conjoined." Finally, this study claims that the functional differences observed in the comparatives of three languages can be explained in terms of the transitivity model (grammatical relations of the comparee and the standard).

1. Introduction

When we describe a quality, quantity, or manner of one thing (or person), we contrast it with other thing(s). Comparative constructions are introduced to express such an evaluation between the two things (or persons)¹. This study deals with the comparative constructions in English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin using corpora in cross-linguistic contrast.

First, we need to summarize the functions of comparative constructions. A comparative construction is a kind of adverbial construction, and it needs at least two participants, i.e., the comparee and the standard. The comparee is the thing (or person) we are describing, and the standard indicates the thing (or person) that we choose to contrast with the comparee. By comparing two entities, we can express whether the comparee is big or small, quick or slow, much or little, etc. This study is an attempt to clarify the characteristics of the comparative constructions

using parallel texts in English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin. Tok Pisin is a creole language spoken in Papua New Guinea, and it is worth observing the comparative constructions in Tok Pisin by contrasting with other languages. Tok Pisin, like other creole languages, has a simple grammar, and its lexicon is mixed with English and other indigenous languages in Melanesia. Moreover, this study uses Japanese (a typical nominative-accusative language in Eurasia) as a contrast.

Through this contrastive study of typologically distinct languages, by focusing on Tok Pisin, it will become clear how the comparative element is introduced into grammar.

2. Purpose of this study and parallel text research

Contrasting languages is an approach to explore functional-cognitive characteristics of grammatical morphemes and constructions. There are a number of previous studies contrasting languages, and we can contrast some languages by using reference grammars, dictionaries, and interrogation of native speakers using questionnaires (cf. special edition of *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung* (STUF) 60, 2007). The present contrastive study claims that it is not enough to analyze the comparative constructions only in English or another single language, and Stassen (1985, 2005) has already pointed out that there are some other types of comparative constructions, such as locational, conjoined types, etc. (cf. Nose 2007, Henkelmann 2006). However, Stassen's typological view is insufficient in that he checked mainly descriptive grammars of the languages that he investigated, and it lacks text-based research of the comparatives. Thus, in this study, in terms of typological interest and availability of parallel texts, I have chosen the following three typologically distinct languages: English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin (cf. Cysouw & Wälchli 2007). Tok Pisin is a creole language based on English, and its grammatical features are borrowed or affected from the English grammar. Nevertheless, the

grammar of Tok Pisin is still primitive, and more or less reflects on human conceptualization (cf. Mihalic 1986).

For contrastive purposes, this study uses part of the *New Testament* written in English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin (see also, Vries 2007). Briefly, grammatical (word order and possession) and geographical data of each language are shown in the following².

- English (Indo-European, Europe): SVO, “John’s book”
- Japanese (Independent, East Asia): SOV, “John-no hon” (possessive marker “no”)
- Tok Pisin (Creole, Papua New Guinea): SVO, “buk bilong John” (close relationship preposition “bilong”)

2.1 Some kinds of comparative constructions

Stassen (1985, 2005) has pointed out that there are four types of comparative constructions: locational, exceed, conjoined, and particle. Each type is shown with examples in the following (1)-(4), (cf. Nose 2007)³.

- **Locational: Korean (East Asia)**

- (1) Thalo-nun Hanakho-pota khi-ka khu-ta.
 Taro-TOP Hanako-STM tallness-FOC big-Ending suffix
 “Taro is taller than Hanako”

Locational comparative constructions are dominant in Eurasian languages, and standard marker includes some meanings of locative elements⁴.

- **Exceed: Nguna (Oceania)**

- (2) Nasuma waia e parua liu nasuma aginau.
 house this COP big exceed house my
 “This house is bigger than my house.”

Comparative meaning can be expressed by using the verb “exceed, surpass” in this type. This

exceed type is observed in African, South East Asian, and Oceanic languages.

- Conjoined: Wari' (South America) (Everett & Kem 1997: 194)

(3) Amon mixem na womu cwa. Om ca mixem homa ca womum
 little black cotton-my this not-exist black much cotton-your

“My clothes are more black than yours; my clothes are a little black, your clothes are not so black.”

Conjoined comparative constructions consist of two sentences, one positive and the other negative.

This type is primitive and less grammaticalized, and is found in South American and Australian Aboriginal languages (Dimmendaal 2001).

- Particle: Spanish (Uritani 2002: 91)

(4) Este lápiz es más largo que ése.
 this pencil COP PAM long STM it

“This pencil is longer than it.”

Finally, the particle type is observed in almost all European languages. The standard marker is expressed by the particle form, and English is classified in this type.

2.2 Text-based research of the comparative

This study contrasts Tok Pisin with English and Japanese using parallel texts (cf. Vries 2007, Stolz 2007). The material is the *New Testament (new international version)* (*Nupela Testamen* in Tok Pisin), and we study comparative constructions presented in its different versions. Preliminary studies of comparative constructions (Heine 1997, Stassen 1985, 2005, Haspelmath & Buchholz 1988, Nose 2007) claimed that there are five parameters (and three-letter abbreviations) defining the comparative, as in (5).

- (5) Five parameters of the comparative constructions (Haspelmath & Buchholz 1998: 279)

This house is more beautiful than that one.

1 Comparee	2 Parameter marker	3 Parameter	4 Standard marker	5 Standard
COM	PAM	PAR	STM	STAN

As the English example showed in (5), comparative constructions do not always need five parameters: some can be omitted or do not appear at all in some languages. Accordingly, this study will observe behaviors of two of them, COM and STAN. However, we cannot identify such parameters in exceed (6) and conjoined (7) types. The five parameters are not obligatory in the comparative, but it is still worth paying attention to those of COM and STAN.

(6) Tok Pisin (Matai 35)

Em	i	winim	Solomon
it	COP	surpass	Solomon
COM		STM?	STAN (missing PAM, PAR)

“It is greater than Solomon.”

(7) Amele (Roberts 1987: 135)

Jo	i	ben	(qa)	jo	eu	ben	ca.
house	this	big	but	house	that	big	add
COM		PAR		STAN		PAR	PAM (missing STM)

“This house is big but that house is bigger.”

In this study, the relationship between COM, STM, and STAN are examined, and semantic characteristics of STAN are considered. STAN has a significant role in the comparative, and we will observe which element is chosen in the *New Testament*.

Thus, this study contrasts the comparative constructions among three languages by using the same material. In contrasting the parallel texts among the languages, there might be differences of translations and other difficulties (see also, Stolz 2007). Here, we will illustrate advantages of this parallel-text study, and summarize this research method. We can make use of the translation texts in the *New Testament*, and this is better than checking the grammar of each language. Tok Pisin is used mainly for everyday speech, and rarely for written texts. The *New Testament* in Tok Pisin is useful for such a contrastive study. On the other hand, the *New Testament* in English is an old written text, and the expressions are rather formal and not a good discourse resource (Vries [2007] also discussed benefits and challenges of using Bible texts). The Japanese translation is also formal, but the translation is a new one in spite of its written style. Then, an examination is made on the forms used to express comparative meanings by extracting them from the cross-linguistic parallel texts.

3. Results

In this section, some examples of the comparative constructions are assembled. This study used the parallel texts in the three languages, and contrasts the data cross-linguistically. First, we made an investigation of finding comparative constructions from the English version. There are 78 examples, excluding the comparative sentences without the standard marker and the standard “than X.” Then, we contrast the English comparatives with the translations in Japanese. The Japanese equivalents are shown in Table 1.

Comparative type	Forms	Numbers of examples
Locational	<i>yor</i> (locational STM)	51

Exceed	<i>masaru</i> “surpass,” <i>otoru</i> “be inferior to”	8
Lexicalized STM	<i>ijou</i> “more than”	6
PAM only	<i>issou, motto</i> “further, more”	3
Superlative	<i>mottomo</i> “the most”	2
Others	---	8

Table 1: Japanese equivalents of the English comparative

In Japanese, there is a typical locational standard marker “*yor*,” and this type of locational comparative was found in 51 sentences, as in (8). In addition, some forms are translated in an exceed type, using the verbs “*masaru*” (be superior) and “*otoru*” (be inferior), as in (9). It is also possible to express a comparative meaning by adding some intensifier (or PAM) forms like “*issou*” or “*motto*.” There are some lexical forms and two superlative forms, too (see (10)). In Japanese, the locational comparative is a typical usage, and there are some other forms.

(8) Matthew 6:

En (English): But after me will come one who is more powerful [than] I⁵.

Jp (Japanese): *Watashi-no atokara kuru kata-wa, watashi-[yori] sugurete orareru.*

Tp (Tok Pisin): *Tasol man i kam bihain long mi, strong bilong em i [winim] strong bilong mi.*

(9) Matthew 35:

En: For she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater [than] Solomon is here

Jp: *Kono jouou-wa Solomon-no chie-wo kikutameni, chi-no hatekara kitakara dearu. Kokoni, Solomon-ni [masaru] mono-ga aru.*

Tp: Dispela kwin i stap long arere tru bilong graun, na em i kam harim Solomon i autim gutpela save bilong em. Tasol man i stap hia, em i [winim] Solomon.

(10) Corinthians 15:

En: We are to be pitied more [than] all men.

Jp: Watashitachi-wa subete-no hito-no-nakade mottomo mijimena mono desu.

Tp: Em i olsem liklik tasol [Mobeta] ol i sori tumas long yumi.

Next, we contrast the English comparatives with the translations in Tok Pisin. The Tok Pisin equivalents are shown in Table 2.

Comparative type	Forms	Numbers of examples
Exceed	<i>winim</i> “surpass”	41
Conjoined	<i>Mobeta</i> “more better,” <i>nogut</i> “no good”	13
Particle STM	<i>olsem</i> 3, <i>long</i> 9	12
PAM only	<i>moa</i> “more,” <i>tumas</i> “too much, too many,” <i>inap</i> “enough,” <i>tasol</i> “only, just”	10
Others	---	10

Table 2: Tok Pisin equivalents of the English comparatives

Tok Pisin prefers an exceed type with the verb “winim” (surpass). The comparative constructions of using the verb “winim” are 41 sentences like (8), although it is possible in Tok Pisin to express English-based “particle” comparatives using “olsem” or “long,” as in (11a, b). There are 12 examples of the particle comparative type; STM “long” is present in nine, and STM “olsem” in

three.

(11) Tok Pisin: (Mihalic 1986: 41)

a. Em i moa bik [olsem] mi.

b. Em i moa bik [long] mi.

“He is bigger than I.”

c. Em i go antap [long] olgeta heven. (Ephesians 4)

“One who ascended higher than all the heavens.”

It is worth noting that there are 13 sentences of the conjoined type. In (12), the sentence expresses “gutpela” in the first sentence and then the form “nogut” follows in the next sentence. As a result of the conjoining, a comparative nuance (“em i gutpela” [to marry is good]) occurs.

(12) Corinthians 7

En: For it is better to marry [than] to burn with passion.

Jp: Jouyoku-ni mi-wo kogasu-[yori]-wa, kekkonshita-hou-ga mashi dakara desu.

Tp: Sapos ol i marit, em i gutpela. [Nogut] bel bilong ol i kirap nabaut olsem paia.

Moreover, there are two means of expressing comparative meaning. As already shown above, one is an English-based comparative, which uses the standard marker “long” or “olsem,” as in (11a, c), and another is a simple sentence with parameter markers (PAM) “moa,” “inap,” and “tasol,” as in (13).

(13) Matthew 10

En: Anyone who loves his father or mother more [than] me is not worthy of me.

Jp: Watashi-[yori] chichi ya haha-wo aisuru-mono-wa watashi-ni fusawakushiku-nai

Tp: Man i laikim papa no mama bilong en na i no laikim mi moa yet, em i no inap i stap pren bilong mi.

In (13), the comparative constructions in English and Japanese are expressed with STM “than” in English and “yori” in Japanese. Tok Pisin, however, does not make a canonical comparative, and it has only a parameter marker “moa.”

Finally, this study investigated which element took the standard position (STAN) in the comparative constructions of the Bible. We observed some STAN entities from the comparative constructions, and classified to the following four types, as in (14).

(14) Classification of the status of the standard in the comparative:

- | | |
|---|----|
| a. Noun, person (including God and angels): | 27 |
| b. Noun, thing (animate 4, inanimate 16, abstract 5): | 25 |
| c. Noun phrase, infinitive: | 17 |
| d. Demonstrative: | 9 |

Basically, STAN is used to compare with the comparee (COM), and stereotypical people or things seem to be used as STAN. Indeed, usage of a person or an animate entity is frequent, and abstract thing(s) are few. The Bible texts are written and regarded as means of educating on religious topics. For this purpose, some comparatives are expressed with STAN of noun phrase or infinitive. Such grammatically complex STAN are characteristic in the Bible texts.

4. Discussion

In this section, the following three points are discussed in terms of contrastive and functional perspectives. The first point is that this study examined the *New Testament* in English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin, and used translations. We have shown some advantages and disadvantages in this cross-linguistic study. There is rarely a good written resource in Tok Pisin, and the *New Testament* is one of the good ones and available in English and Japanese (there is no *Harry Potter* or *Le petit prince* in Tok Pisin, cf. Stolz 2007). Nevertheless, the *New Testament* texts in the three languages are written and include formal usages. Furthermore, we could not find many examples of the comparative; only 78 sentences in more than 700 pages. In the small number of comparative constructions, the comparative forms between English and Tok Pisin turned out to be different from each other, and Tok Pisin did not copy the English grammar despite earlier contact between the languages. Japanese, on the other hand, has provided another point of view in this study. The locational comparative type is dominant in Japanese, but we have identified exceed type usage as well.

The second point is that we considered the grammatical status of the standard (STAN) and the standard marker (STM). According to Stassen (1985, 2005) and Heine (1997), the comparative constructions can be classified into four types: locational, conjoined, exceed, and particle. The differing usages of such four types will be examined through this contrastive study as well. This study has observed that English has a grammaticalized particle “than” (originated from “then”) as STM, but in Japanese and Tok Pisin, there are some variations; mainly, Japanese has the locational “yori” (originated from locative postposition) and exceed (verbs “masaru/otoru”), and Tok Pisin has exceed, conjoined, and particle types. These findings relating to the comparative among the languages are considered to be based on the cognitive differences of comparison in each language,

and in particular, it is considered how they construe the relationship between the comparee (COM) and the standard (STAN). Stassen (2005) has observed that the locational type is the most frequent comparative construction in the world, and particle comparative is observed in English and other Indo-European languages.

Below is a summary of the relationship between STAN and STM in the three languages:

(15) Formal differences of the comparative constructions in the three languages

- a. English: *than he*, or *than him* (particle)⁶
- b. Japanese 1: *kare-yori* (locational); 2: *kare-ni masaru* (exceed)
- c. Tok Pisin 1: *winim em* (exceed); 2: *A i bik, mobeta B* (conjoined); 3: *long em*, or *olsem em* (particle)

In spite of the difficulties in translating them, the comparatives in English are translated to other comparative types in Japanese and Tok Pisin. Nevertheless, we can conclude that when English uses the particle type, Japanese prefers the locational, and Tok Pisin, the exceed. In (16), such formal and constructional distributions will be construed in terms of transitivity (cf. Hopper and Thompson 1980). Adopting the transitivity hypothesis of Hopper & Thompson (1980) makes it easier to explain differences between the comparatives. Comparative constructions need at least two participants (comparee and standard), as transitive sentences need two participants (agent and patient in transitive, and COM and STAN in comparative). Differences in the comparative can be explained by the grammatical relations (subject, direct object, or oblique) of STAN. This study claims that it is possible to illustrate the grammatical status of STAN by using transitivity, as in (16) and Figure 1⁷.

(16) Grammatical status of the standard, based on transitivity (A: comparee, B: standard)

Subject: A is big and B is small. (conjoined)

Object: A surpasses B. (exceed)

Oblique/locative: A-wa B-yori chiisai. (locational) A is bigger than B. (particle)

Thus, we create a triangle of grammatical relations with subject, direct object, and oblique/locative, and can posit the comparative types of the three languages as in Figure 1. There are three grammatical relations of STAN: subject, direct object, and oblique/locative. STAN in conjoined type appears in the subject position, and STAN in exceed type as the direct object. English particle STM and Japanese locational STM are classified as oblique/locative, and STAN is regarded as occupying the oblique/locative position.

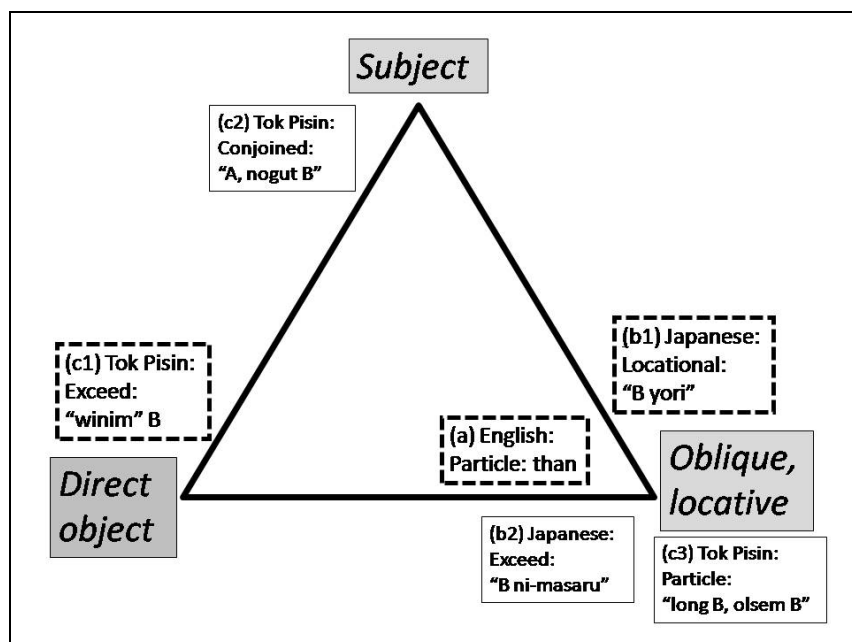


Figure 1: Transitivity model of standard in the comparative constructions

Finally, the semantic status of STAN in comparative constructions will be considered. From the explanation above, we can identify four semantic types of STAN: noun (person), noun (thing), noun phrase and infinitive, and demonstrative. Each number is shown in (14) above, and it is probable that the person and animate entities take the position of STAN. It should be emphasized that this conclusion is based on the translated texts of the *New Testament*, and does not necessarily reflect the situation in spoken language or corpus data. However, when we make a comparison between COM and STAN, a given specific person or animate one will be chosen as STAN.

5. Conclusion

This study examined comparative constructions using translations of texts in the *Bible* in three languages: English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin. There are clear typological overviews, and this study tried to clarify them in terms of transitivity.

First, English has a fixed grammatical comparative construction that uses the particle “than,” and Japanese has another fixed locational comparative that uses “yori.” In Tok Pisin, however, there are several options for expressing comparative meanings: exceed is frequent, but there are also conjoined and particle examples. This study has illustrated differences such as these in the comparatives in three languages, focusing on the grammatical status of the standard, and visualized the constructions in terms of transitivity.

Second, this study examined the semantic status of the standard position, and it turned out that a personal and animate noun frequently appears as the standard in comparative constructions. Moreover, we have observed that longer forms such as noun phrases and infinitives can appear as the standard in the *New Testament*.

Finally, this cross-linguistic study has identified that the standard takes a rather higher grammatical position (subject and direct object) in primitive comparatives (conjoined and exceed), and they are observed in Tok Pisin. By contrast, through a certain grammaticalization process, the standard is demoted to the oblique/locative position in English and Japanese.

Notes

- * The following abbreviations are used: COM, comparee; PAM, parameter marker; PAR, parameter; STM, standard marker; STAN, standard; COP, copula; FOC, focus; TOP, topic.
- 1 Henkelmann (2006: 371) has another point of view on comparatives in terms of adjectives. He pointed out that there are four gradable adjectives (positive *tall*, equative *as tall as*, comparative *taller*, and superlative *tallest*), and the comparative in which the standard of comparison is implied.
- 2 These grammatical and geographical descriptions of English, Japanese, and Tok Pisin are based on the information from *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (Haspelmath *et al.* (eds. 2005)).
- 3 Dimmendaal (2001: 70) considered a possibility of languages without a comparative construction. He wrote, in Australian languages, “grammatical constructions involving comparison (‘bigger’, ‘better’, ‘younger’, ‘smarter’) are unnatural in some speech communities.”
- 4 Heine (1997: 112) explained the locative source meanings for the standard marker, and they are “at,” “from,” and “to.”
- 5 The standard marker is indicated by the bracket [], and PAM, PAR, STM, and STAN are indicated by an underline in the data of the parallel text examples from (8)–(13).

6 It is natural that there are conjoined and exceed types of the comparatives in English as well.

Heine (1997) pointed out the possible constructions in English.

(i) A is small and B is big. (conjoined)

(ii) A is superior to B. (exceed)

(iii) A surpasses B in cleverness. (exceed)

Needless to say, the particle type is the most frequent, but every language has two or three options expressing comparative meaning.

7 The transitivity model suggested in this study does not imply that the other factors of transitivity (aspect, affectedness, and state of affairs) are relevant to the comparative constructions.

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