

# The Standard Marker in Malayalam Encodes Comparative Semantics

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## 1. Introduction

• **Standard assumption**

The semantics of comparison is encoded in the comparative morpheme *–er/more* and the standard marker *than* is taken to be semantically vacuous.

(1) John is taller*er* *than* Bill (is).

• **Alternatives**

The standard marker is not semantically vacuous (Kennedy 2007, Alrenga et al 2012, Schwarzschild 2014).

• **Main claim**

On the basis of data from Malayalam comparative constructions, I will show that *than* is not semantically vacuous. It encodes comparative semantics and works in tandem with the comparative marker *more*.

## 3. Distribution of *more*

- The distribution of *more* depends on the predicate.
- Malayalam does not have lexical adjectives. Property concepts, either relativized or nominalized, are used to build adjectival meaning.

	<i>kaa[-um] comparative</i>	<i>il-um comparative</i>
a. NP comparative (outside possession)	obligatory <i>more</i>	obligatory <i>more</i>
b. NP comparative (with possession)	optional <i>more</i>	obligatory <i>more</i>
c. Verbal comparative	obligatory <i>more</i>	obligatory <i>more</i>
d. Relativized property concepts	prohibited <i>more</i>	-----
e. Nominalized property concepts	optional <i>more</i>	obligatory <i>more</i>

**Generalization # 2:** The behavior of *more* is quite distinct from the English *–er/more*.

## 4. Distribution of *than*

Implicit comparatives are allowed in English where the standard phrase is omitted.

(4) a. {Come out onto the porch.} It's cooler*er* here.

(5) a. John has 3 pens. I have *more*.  
b. John is 6 ft tall. I am taller*er*.

These comparatives are disallowed in Malayalam

(6) \*Anil-inə oru pena unṭə, enikkə *kuuṭuttal* unṭə.  
Anil-DAT a pen EX COP I-DAT more POSS V  
'Anil has a pen. I have more than that.

(7) Anil-inə oru pena unṭə, enikkə [*atin-e kaa[um]* *kuuṭuttal* unṭə.  
Anil-DAT a pen EX COP I-DAT that-ACC than more POSS V  
'Anil has a pen. I have more than that.

**Generalization #3:** *More* cannot appear alone without *than*

## 2. Malayalam Comparatives

- Two types of comparatives, depending on the standard marker: *kaa[-um]* and *il-um*. They both show clausal comparison and phrasal comparison (only phrasal variant shown below)
- The *kaa[-um]* is similar to a particle comparative (like *English*) and is unique to Malayalam among other Dravidian languages.

(2) the *kaa[-um] comparative: phrasal*

Anil-inə [*Komalan-e kaa[-um]*] (*kuuṭuttal*) pokkam unṭə  
Anil-DAT Komalan-ACC than-UM more tallness POSS V  
'Anil is taller than Komalan.' (Lit. 'To Anil there is (more) tallness than Komalan.')

- The *il-um* comparative is the common strategy employed by all other Dravidian languages.

(3) the *il-um comparative: phrasal*

Anil-inə [*Komalan-il-um*] \*(*kuuṭuttal*) pokkam unṭə  
Anil-DAT Komalan-LOC-UM more tallness POSS V  
'Anil is taller than Komalan.' (Lit. 'To Anil from Komalan there is more tallness.')

- *kaa[-um]* is a dedicated *than* morpheme found only in comparatives.
- **Generalization # 1:** The comparative marker behaves differently in the two types of comparatives. It is optional with *kaa[-um]* comparatives and obligatory with *il-um* comparatives.

## 5. Analysis

- How do we account for the variable behavior of the comparative marker?

**Option 1:** The *more* encodes the comparative semantics. (the standard assumption)  
We have no explanation for the distribution of the comparative marker ☹

**Option 2:** A silent degree head (*–er*).  
No systematic distinctions between *–er* and the comparative marker. ☹

✓ **Option 3:** *Than* is not semantically vacuous and in addition to the *more* encodes comparative semantics. ☺

### Proposal

- *Than* is not semantically vacuous and acts as a context setter.
- The phrase headed by *than* can function as a quantifier-domain adverbial whereby it restricts the domain of the degree quantifier *more*.

(8) *than*: [[ *kaa[-um]* ]] = λD<sub><d,t></sub>. ∃d [d > max (D)]

- Thus in (1), [*Than Bill is*] denotes a degree- a degree of tallness one would have to exceed in order to be taller than John.
- This degree is Bill's height, the maximal degree to which Bill is tall.
- *More* is an adnominal degree modifier, meaning along the lines of "in addition of", "in excess of".

(9) *more*: [[ *kuuṭuttal* ]] = λd λx . [μ (x) > d]

- **Deriving the distribution of *more***

*Assumptions*

- The standard phrase is a PP adjunct which extraposes for λ- abstraction to a position before the VP.
- Gradability is directly related to property possession (see Menon, in prep)

**When *more* is prohibited (relativized property concepts)**

- *Than* encodes comparison as a context setter, i.e. an implicit comparison

(10) [PP *than wh<sub>i</sub>* Komalan is *t<sub>i</sub>* good] ( [ [ v P ] ] ) = λD. ∃d [d > max (the degree to which Komalan is good )]

- Syntactically and semantically, *more* does not play a role.

**When *more* is optional (nominalized property concepts, NP comparative with possession)**

- PossP introduces a degree variable for PP to bind (see (2), the PossV is the head of the PossP).

- *More* gives the degree exceeding the specified standard.

(11) *than* ([ [ *kuuṭuttal* ] ] ) = the degree to which Anil is tall in excess of the degree to which Komalan is tall.

**When *more* is obligatory (Verbal comparative, NP comparative outside possession)**

- It introduces the measure function as the NP and VP predicates are non-gradable.
- These comparatives occur with a non possessive V, unlike (2)-(3).

## 6. Conclusion

- There is a maximally transparent mapping from surface syntax to meaning as both the comparative morpheme (*more*) and the standard morpheme (*than*) contribute to the semantics of comparison.
- The *than* can never be omitted from comparative constructions.
- The *than* phrase binds the degree argument in the matrix clause in bare comparatives or acts as a quantifier domain adverbial in the presence of *more*.

## 7. References

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Many thanks to Roumi Pancheva for useful discussions. This work was funded by the USC graduate school dissertation completion fellowship 2015-2016.