

Positively Comparative

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English comparative constructions typically include an item of comparison, a *than*-clause or phrase as in (1). But this is not necessarily so. We also find data like (2).

- (1) a. Mr Darcy is richer **than Mr Bingley is**.
b. Mr Darcy is richer **than Mr Bingley**.
c. Mr Bingley has five thousand a year. Mr Darcy is richer **than that**.
- (2) Mr Bingley has five thousand a year. Mr Darcy is richer.

In this case, we intuitively make an anaphoric connection between the first clause in (2) and the second clause in (2). The example is very similar to (1c). Let us assume that the interpretation of (1c) proceeds as sketched below (compare e.g. Stechow (1984), Heim (2000)).

- (3) a. $[[-er [than that]] [1[Mr Darcy is t_1 rich]]]$
b. $[[[1[Mr Darcy is t_1 rich]]]]^g = \lambda d. Mr Darcy is d-rich$
c. $[[that]]^g = 5000\text{£ p.a.}$
d. $[[-er]] (d)(D) = 1 \text{ iff } \max(D) > d$
- (3') a. $\max(\lambda d. Mr Darcy is d-rich) > 5000\text{£ p.a.}$
b. The degree d such that Mr Darcy is d -rich exceeds the degree of wealth measured by an annual income of 5000£.

It is natural to suppose that the only difference between (1c) and (2) is that the item of comparison is an overt anaphoric element 'that' in the case of the former and a covert anaphoric element in the case of the latter. Thus the interpretation of (2) follows the steps in (4) and derives the truth conditions in (3') just as before.

- (4) a. $[[-er c] [1[Mr Darcy is t_1 rich]]]$
b. $[[-er c]]^g (\lambda d. Mr Darcy is d-rich)$
c. $[[c]]^g = 5000\text{£ p.a.}$

Let us compare this to examples in which the adjective shows up in the unmarked, positive form. It is well-known that the interpretation of such statements is context dependent. The individual to whom the property expressed by the adjective is attributed has that property to an extent remarkable in the relevant comparison class. This is not expressed overtly in (5), but must be derived from the context. A simple semantics for (5) (following specifically the formulation in Heim & Kratzer (1998)) is given in (6).

- (5) Mr Darcy is rich.
- (6) a. $\exists d [Mr Darcy is d-rich \ \& \ d > c]$
(where c is the wealth standard made salient by the utterance context)
b. $rich_{POS} = \lambda x. \exists d [x is d-rich \ \& \ d > c]$
(where c is the wealth standard made salient by the utterance context)

If we do not know exactly what the context of (5) is, an intuition of vagueness arises: it is not completely clear what would count as rich (rich compared to the average member of the society we are considering? Rich for a gentleman?). It is interesting that the positive allows explicit information as to the intended standard. Beck et al. (2004) propose that the *compared to*-phrase in (7) interacts with the main clause in the following manner (the implicatures that arise in such examples are ignored here):

(7) **Compared to Mr Bennet**, Mr Darcy is rich.

- (8) a. $\exists d[\text{Mr Darcy is } d\text{-rich} \ \& \ d > c]$
 (where c is the wealth standard made salient by the utterance context)
 b. c := the standard of wealth made salient by comparison to Mr Bennet
 := Mr Bennet's degree of wealth

Thus the *compared to*-phrase serves to indirectly (contextually) fix the intended value for the comparison standard of the positive. The question I would like to raise is: what precisely is the difference between the positive and the comparative? It seems that there is no significant theoretical difference between (9a) and (9b) regarding how we identify the degree that Mr Darcy's wealth is compared to. Both times we suppose that the semantics provides a free variable whose value is contextually fixed. There is even some evidence in favour of such similarity in that (10) is acceptable as well.

- (9) a. Mr Darcy is rich.
 b. Mr Darcy is richer.

(10) **Compared to Mr Bennet**, Mr Darcy is richer.

- (11) a. $[[\text{-er } c]]^g (\lambda d. \text{Mr Darcy is } d\text{-rich})$
 b. c := the standard of wealth made salient by comparison to Mr Bennet
 := Mr Bennet's degree of wealth

However, there is a clear intuitive difference between (9a) and (9b) in terms of the discourse contexts in which they are acceptable. While (9b) requires that a particular degree of wealth has been made available to serve as an antecedent for the covert item of comparison in (9b), (9a) imposes no such requirement. This is immediately apparent in (12), where only the sentence with the adjective in the positive form is an acceptable reply by Charlotte. It can also be seen in (13): the comparative version (assuming that there is no further relevant preceding context) entails that Mr Darcy makes more money than the just mentioned 5000£ p.a. The positive version entails no such thing; the 5000£ p.a. could be a description of Mr Darcy's wealth.

- (12) Lizzy: Tell me something about Mr Darcy.
 Charlotte: Mr Darcy is rich./ # Mr Darcy is richer./ # Mr Darcy is richer than that.

(13) 5000£ p.a. is a nice income. Mr Darcy is richer./ Mr Darcy is rich.

Our standard theories of comparison, and indeed our understanding of context dependency in general, would model both kinds of data with the help of a free variable whose value is assigned by context. The value of the variable is a degree of wealth in both (9a) and (9b). But the discourse behaviour is different in that it needs a clearly provided antecedent in (9b) but not in (9a). I do not know why that is. I also do not know how to model the empirical difference with the theoretical tools at my disposal. I further think that this is one instance of a general question about the status of various items of comparison that language can

specify or neglect to specify overtly, that is, the question of how these items interact with the compositional semantics of comparison.

- (14) a. He is rich **for a farmer**.
b. **(Of these men,)** he is the richest.

References

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