THE CORRELATION BETWEEN SURPASS COMPARATIVES AND VERBY LANGUAGES

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0. Theoretical background

Anward et al (1997) addresses the problem of a still rather weak understanding of parts-of-speech in a universal framework (cf. Hengeveld 1992). The authors suggest that a possible direction for research may be to think in terms of the logically possible parameters and the possible constraints on variation within them. In calling for more work within this field Anward et al identifies a set of guiding questions for future research. Of these, two are particularly relevant to this study:

(a) Implications involving parts of speech (POS): are there any POS whose presence in a language is predictable from some other property of language?

(b) Universals of POS related to historical changes: are there any universals regarding source of change and target of change in the diachrony of POS classes?

This paper\textsuperscript{1} attempts to answer these two questions in relation to the presence or absence of adjectives in languages of the isolating type. As a first step in this direction it focuses on Southeast Asian (SEA) languages and aims at showing the correlation between a certain type of comparative construction, namely the Surpass type (SUR), and the absence of a syntactically distinctive class of adjectives. The hypothesis is that SUR comparatives evolve from a serial verb construction (SVC) in which V1 is a property verb (PV) and V2 is a predicate meaning 'pass, surpass or exceed'. It is the presence of V1 as a PV that allows:
the SVC to occur given that the PV is syntactically a verb
V2 to evolve into a comparative marker given that the PV can function semantically as an 'adjective' and therefore be marked for degree.

1. On Surpass comparatives

In his seminal work on the typology of comparative constructions, Stassen (Stassen 1985) recognizes three different types of Exceed comparatives:

- Exceed 1: SUR type [X PV-SUR Y]
- Exceed 2: Nouny 1 [X V-SUR ADJ Y]
- Exceed 3: Nouny 2 [X COP ADJ V-SUR-INF Y]

Examples:

1. Ngo5 hou2 gwo lei5 (Cantonese)
   I good SUR you
   'I am better than you'

2. Ge ka m ike (Igbo, Stassen 1985:167)
   You exceed me strength
   'you are stronger than me'

3. Mti huu ni mrefu ku-shinda ule (Swahili, ibid.:169)
   tree this is big INF-exceed that
   'this tree is taller than that'

For the purpose of this study, only the first type of Exceed will be considered, here called Surpass.² The correlation between type of comparative and the nature of adjectives in a language had already been captured in Stassen (1985:185). Universal 10001 states that:

"If a language has an Exceed-1 comparative, it is verby. If an Exceed language is verby, it has an Exceed-1 comparative".
It is interesting to note that, according to Stassen, the three formally distinct types of comparatives "are not significant for typological purpose" (159-60), i.e. not related to factors specific to the typology of comparatives. I would like to argue otherwise; I suggest that we rephrase Universal 1001 in order to capture the fact that the type of SUR comparative is indeed significant for typological purpose as it helps us predict the nature of the adjectival class (or lack thereof) in a given language. I will therefore suggest that Universal 1001 be reinterpreted as:

Only languages with verby adjectives have Surpass comparatives.

In other words, verbyness is a necessary condition for a Surpass comparative to arise.

2. Verbs and adjectives

The question of 'Adjectives' in Varieties of Chinese has been tackled in several studies within different theoretical frameworks (Li and Thompson 1981, McCawley 1992, Matthews and Yip 1994, Ansaldo 1999, Francis and Matthews 2001). Generally there seems to be strong evidence in favor of treating 'adjectives' as property verbs in Sinitic as they share the grammatical properties of verbs (cf. Francis and Matthews 2000). Moreover syntactic similarity between verbs and adjectives is a prominent areal feature of SEA languages (as argued in Prasithrathsint 2000 for Thai). Likewise, comparatives of the SUR type are characteristic of many languages of the SEA area (Ansaldo 1999). This is not a coincidence. This paper will show that there is a direct relationship between these two syntactic features.

In Stassen (1985) it is noted that a majority of SUR comparative construction are found within the syntactic context of serialization. SVCs can in fact be seen as the necessary syntactic context for Surpass comparatives to arise.
Diachronically: e.g. Cantonese
Verb 'Surpass' \(\rightarrow\) SVC \{V1 + V2\} where V1 is a PV and V2 is a Surpass verb \(\rightarrow\) comparative construction \{PV + SUR\}

The different uses of the SUR morpheme can still be found in limited, idiomatic contexts:

- verbal: ngo5 zoeng1 seong3jung6kat1 gwo3-zo2 ngaak6
  I CL c redit card pass-ASP quota
  'I've exceeded the limit of my credit card'

- V2 in SVC: muk6joeng4jan4 haang4 gwo3 di1 saan1leng5
  shepherd go pass PL mountain
  'The shepherd crossed the mountain range'

- Resultative in RVC: keoi5 paau2 dak1 faai3 gwo3 ngo5
  s/he run ADV fast pass I
  'He runs faster than me'

This path of development is attested for Cantonese and other Southern varieties of Sinitic such as Hakka and Chaozhou (cf. Ansaldo 1999). As a consequence, one can analyze the SUR constructions as a type of SVCs even synchronically. In Mok (1998), SUR types in Cantonese are described as sharing the syntactic properties of resultative verb constructions (RVC). This is important since it implies that the PV is verby in nature, given that RVCs typically describe dynamic events. The following examples illustrated the resultative nature of the SUR construction in Cantonese:

I. ngo5 wan4 lei5 m4 dou2 (Matthews, p.c.)
  I find you NEG succeed
  'I can't find you'

II. keoi5 peng4 ngo5 m4 gwo3 (Matthews, p.c.)
  s/he cheap I NEG surpass
  'he can't beat me for price'

Note that (I) is a prototypical RVC and (II), with the comparative marker \(\text{gwo}\), shares the same syntactic structure. From the above it appears that, in Cantonese: