

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 paper¹ 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 1001 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' → SVC {V1 + V2} where V1 is a PV and V2 is a Surpass verb → 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 credit card pass-ASP quota
 'I've exceeded the limit of my credit card'
- V2 in SVC: muk6joeng4jan4 **haang4 gwo3** dil saan1leng5
 shepherd go pass PL mountain
 'The shepherd crossed the mountain range'
- Resultative in RVC: keoi5 paau 2 dak1 **faai 3gwo3** 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 *gwo*, shares the same syntactic structure. From the above it appears that, in Cantonese:

- the SUR is derived diachronically from a verbal element
- the 'adjective' in the comparative construction needs to be verby.

Are these features language specific or can we find areal, if not universal tendencies? In the rest of the paper I will address mainly the areal question, though it is believed that the answer to that will shed some light on the possible answer to the universal question.

3. 'Adjectives' in SEA languages

In this section I will look at 'adjectives' in Thai and Vietnamese. These languages show typical SUR constructions in the comparison of inequality, e.g.

- (1) khwaay yàw kwàa wua (Thai)
 buffalo big SUR cow
 'buffaloes are bigger than cows'
- (2) anh ây tốt hơn tôi (Vietnamese)
 He good SUR I
 'he is better than me'

Is there a relationship between the type of comparative and the way in which property concepts are encoded in these languages? To take the most recent work available on 'adjectives' in Thai, Prasithratsint (2000) argues against a separate category of ADJ in Thai on the following grounds:

- they occur in predicative position
- they can be negated
- they occur in imperative voice
- they occur with aspect markers

Moreover, Thai verbs, just like adjectives, can be

- nominalized
- [compared]³
- intensified
- combined with classifiers

In other words, adjectives in Thai are verby. Interestingly, a very similar state of affairs applies to Vietnamese as shown in the examples below.

'Adjectives' in predicative position and negated:

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------------|-----|---|
| (3) | anh ấy tốt
he good
'he is good' | (4) | anh ấy không tốt
he NEG good
'he is not good' |
| (5) | anh ấy chạy
he run
'he runs' | (6) | anh ấy không chạy
he NEG run
'he doesn't run' |

'Adjectives' in imperative voice:

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|------------------------------|
| (7) | phải tốt luôn
IMP good often
'always be good' | (8) | phải ăn
IMP eat
'eat!' |
|-----|---|-----|------------------------------|

'Adjectives' with aspectual markers:

- | | | | |
|-----|---|------|--|
| (9) | chị ấy ăn rồi
she eat ASP
'she has eaten' | (10) | chị ấy tốt rồi
she good ASP
'she has become good'. |
|-----|---|------|--|

Examples of post-modification:

- | | |
|------|--|
| (11) | tôi thích người tốt
I like people good
'I like nice people' |
| (12) | tôi thích người uống rượu
I like people drink wine
'I like people who drink' |

The examples above show a parallel between Thai and Vietnamese: though in both languages we can distinguish a

semantic class of property concepts, we do not seem to find clear grammatical distinctions between property concepts and verbs, i.e. there is no distinct part-of-speech of adjectives. These languages can be classified as verby languages (see Wetzler 1995). Therefore, parallel to what we see in Cantonese (and other Sinitic varieties), we have a correlation between verby languages and SUR comparatives. In the next section we look at the nature of SUR constructions in Thai and Vietnamese.

4. SUR constructions in SEA languages

It has been shown in section (2) that Cantonese SUR constructions can be analyzed as RVCs, a fact that could be taken as a functional explanation for the correlation between verbyness and SUR comparatives. In the following however we will see that in Thai and Vietnamese SUR comparatives do not appear to share the properties of RVCs. In Thai a RVC can typically be negated by inserting the negation in between the two verbs, e.g.:

(13) phǒm pay thǔŋ rooŋrian
 I.masculine go arrive school
 'I go to school' (and get there)

(14) phǒm pay mây thǔŋ rooŋrian
 I go NEG arrive school
 'I did not get to the school'

Looking at the SUR construction, we find that the negation typically precedes both verbs and cannot occur in between V1 and V2:

(15) kháw sǔŋ tàæ mây sǔŋ kwàa phǒm
 s/he tall but NEG tall SUR I
 'he is tall but not as tall as me'

- (16) kháw kin mâak tææ (kin) mây mâak kwàa phõm
 s/he eat much but (eat) NEG much SUR I
 'he eats a lot but not as much as me'

A similar situation holds for Vietnamese: while in the RVC the negation occurs in between V1 and V2 (18-19), in the SUR construction the negation precedes both verbs:

- (17a) ăn no (b) ăn không no
 eat full eat NEG full
 'to eat one's fill' 'to not eat one's fill'

- (18a) tôi ăn hết cái bánh
 I eat ASP CL cake
 'I ate up the cake'

- (b) tôi ăn **không** hết cái bánh
 I eat NEG ASP CL cake
 'I can't finish the cake'.

- (19) Anh ấy chạy **không** nhanh hơn tôi
 he run NEG fast SUR I
 'he can't run as fast as me' (marked)

In fact we do not seem to find any diachronic evidence for an evolution of the type described for Cantonese in section (2).

In the King Ramkhang's Inscriptions (13th AD) we find:

- (20) p̄h̄i th̄eep pha daa nay kh̄ăw ?au nán peu yà
 ghost angel in mountain CL that COP big
 kwàa thú p̄h̄i nay muang nii
 SUR every ghost in town this (Krairiksh 1989)

The sentence above shows an instance of SUR morpheme in a V2 position. This seems to suggest that already at this early stage a comparative construction of the SUR type was found. However, I have not been able to find clear examples of verbal usage for the SUR morpheme in Thai nor Vietnamese.

5. Other evidence

Correlation between verby languages and SUR comparatives can be found outside Southeast Asia. For example, Stassen (1985) gives evidence from Yoruba:

(21) o tobi
I big
'I am big'

(22) o tobi ju u
He big SC him
'he is bigger than him'

A possible case of grammaticalization of a SUR verb -- meaning 'surpass', 'pass' or 'exceed'-- into a marker is found in several creoles, e.g. Ndjuka:

(23) a dagu yai bigi pasa mi
the dog here big pass I
'this dog is bigger than me'

These observations suggest that the correlation between SUR comparatives and verbyness goes beyond the linguistic area of SEA and possibly applies to all languages with typically isolating typology. I will consider this possibility in the next section.

6. Final remarks

The correlation between SUR comparatives and verby adjectives seems to hold in three areas typically known for isolating morphology:

- mainland Southeast Asia
- West Africa
- creole languages

Therefore, in respect to question (a) posed in section (0), we can postulate the following generalization between parts-of-speech:

- A. The presence of a comparative construction of the Surpass type is an indication of the absence of a grammatically distinct adjectival class.

The structural, synchronic motivation for this, I suggest lies in that the SUR morpheme appears as second constituent in a (transitive) SVC. For this to happen the first constituent, semantically an adjective, needs to be syntactically a verb, i.e. it will be a PV on which the SUR morpheme attaches.

Regarding question (b) in section 0, we seem to have diachronic evidence to be found in Cantonese as well as creole languages for the emergence of SUR structures through a grammaticalization of SVCs. However, the SEA languages investigated do not show clear traces of this diachronic process. The SUR marker in Thai and Vietnamese could have arisen as the result of contact-induced grammaticalization with southern Sinitic varieties, given the lengthy history of contact between Southern China and mainland Southeast Asia. We can therefore simply attempt the following generalization:

- B. SUR markers may arise through the grammaticalization of V2 in a resultative verb position.

An argument in favor of viewing the correlation between isolating typology, SVCs and SUR structures as non-accidental can also be found in the Tensedness Hypothesis (Wetzer 1995). Isolating typology entails lack of affixed tense marking; since affixed marking of tense can be seen as the main morphological distinction between verbs and adjectives it comes as no surprise that we do not find a distinct class of adjectives in isolating languages.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Stephen Matthews, Sim Sook Hui and Titima Suthiwan for their generous help with data as well as comments.
- ² Surpass comparatives are constructed around markers whose original meaning is that of passing, surpassing or exceeding.
- ³ not considered here to avoid circularity.

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