

# Specificity Condition effects in the English attributive comparative construction

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LSA Annual Meeting, Oakland, CA  
January 8, 2005

## 1 The puzzle

Attributive comparative constructions (ACCs):

- ACCs are DPs in which a comparative adjective occurs prenominally.
- A *than*-phrase expressing the target of comparison may appear after the NP.
- Nominal and clausal targets of comparison are both permitted.

- (1) a. Fido is a more obedient dog than Spot.  
b. Fido is a more obedient dog.
- (2) a. The Cardinals will play better teams than the Cubs will.  
b. The Cardinals will play better teams.

An old puzzle about ACCs (Bresnan 1973:317-319): why are such DPs acceptable when headed by *a*, but not when headed by *the*?

- (3) a. I met a more intelligent student than you.  
b. \*I met the more intelligent student than you.
- (4) a. Jack owns a faster car than Nora (does).  
b. \*Jack owns the faster car than Nora (does).
- (5) a. Fido is a more obedient dog than Spot (was).  
b. \*Fido is the more obedient dog than Spot (was).
- (6) a. The Cardinals will play a better team than the Cubs (will).  
b. \*The Cardinals will play the better team than the Cubs (will).

A prediction made by several previous approaches to (3)–(6) (e.g., Bresnan 1973, Hendrick 1990, Moltmann 1993; see Appendix for details): an ACC is acceptable only if it is headed by the determiner *a*.

But, ACCs may in fact be headed by any weak determiner. Strong determiners, however, cannot head ACCs (Lerner and Pinkal 1995:225, Beil 1997:37).

- (7) a. I met { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} more intelligent students than you (did).  
b. \*I met {most, every, each, these} more intelligent student(s) than you (did).

- (8) a. Jack owns { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} faster cars than Nora (does).  
 b. \*Jack owns {most, every, each, these} faster car(s) than Nora (does).
- (9) a. The Cardinals will play { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} better teams than the Cubs (will).  
 b. \*The Cardinals will play {most, every, each, these} better team(s) than the Cubs (will).

An interesting twist (Hendrick 1990:255, Lerner and Pinkal 1995:225): the strong ACCs in (7b)–(9b) become acceptable when the *than*-phrase is omitted.

- (10) I met {the, most, every, each, these} more intelligent student(s).
- (11) Jack owns {the, most, every, each, these} faster car(s).
- (12) Fido is the more obedient dog.
- (13) The Cardinals will play {the, most, every, each, these} better team(s).

The contrast between (5b),(7b)–(9b), on the one hand, and (10)–(13), on the other, is problematic for other recent approaches to the determiner restrictions seen in ACCs (e.g., Beil 1997; see Appendix for details).

Goals of my presentation:

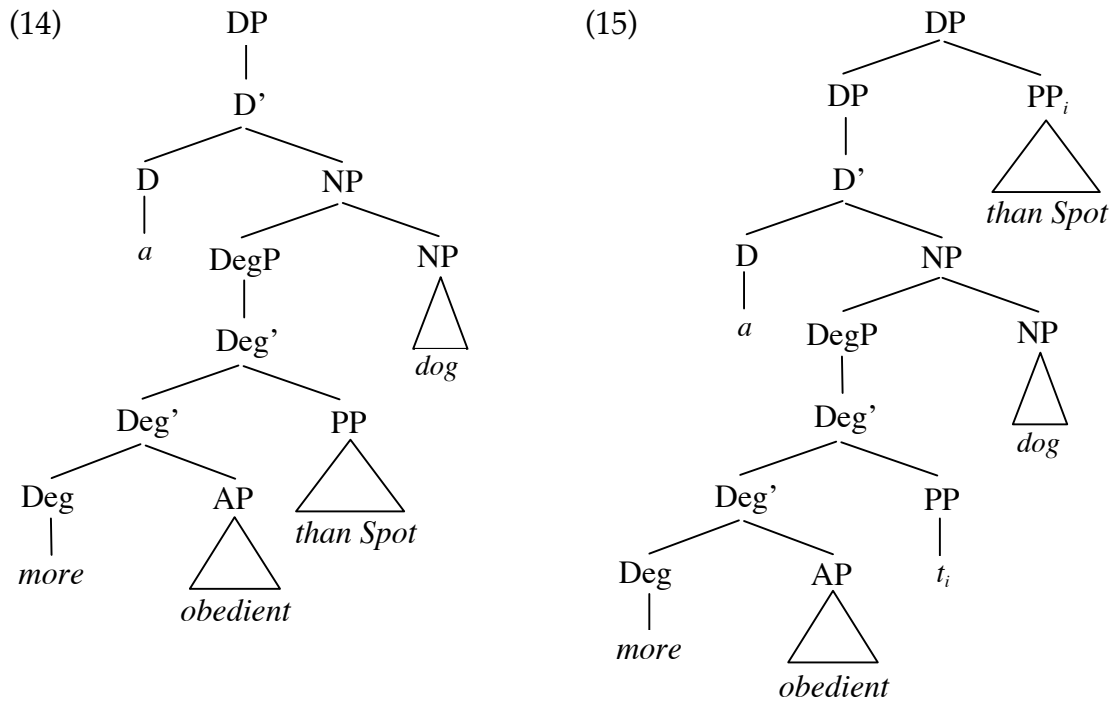
- Show that determiner restrictions in ACCs correlate with constraints on extraction out of DPs
- Propose an account of ACC determiner restrictions that makes use of this correlation
- Investigate some further predictions of this proposal
- Show how ACCs can shed new light on the nature of these extraction constraints

## 2 The syntax of attributive comparative constructions

My assumptions about the structure and derivation of ACCs:

- Comparative constructions are categorially Degree Phrases (DegPs) headed by Deg morpheme *-er / more* (Abney 1987, Corver 1991, 1997, Kennedy 1997).
- *-er / more* takes as its arguments an Adjective Phrase (AP) and an optional *than*-phrase; the former occurs as the immediate complement of Deg, while the latter is base generated as a Deg' adjunct.
- Prenominal attributive modifiers are base generated within the DP as NP adjuncts.
- When present, the *than*-phrase is obligatorily extraposed to a right-adjoined position (Bresnan 1973, Bowers 1975; see Bhatt and Pancheva 2004 for another view).
- The target of *than*-phrase extraposition is minimally DP.

The base-generated and derived structures for *a more obedient dog than Spot* in (1):



### 3 Extraction from DP and the Specificity Condition

The derivation of an ACC with a *than*-phrase will involve extraction out of DP (of the *than*-phrase). Such ACCs should obey constraints on extraction from DP.

The Specificity Condition (Fiengo and Higginbotham 1981): *wh*-movement from DP is acceptable when the DP is headed by *a*, but not when it is headed by *the*.

- (16) a. Who<sub>i</sub> did she direct a movie about t<sub>i</sub>?  
 b. \*Who<sub>i</sub> did she direct the movie about t<sub>i</sub>?

- (17) a. What<sub>i</sub> book did he read a review of t<sub>i</sub>?  
 b. \*What<sub>i</sub> book did he read the review of t<sub>i</sub>?

The distinction relevant to the Specificity Condition is not simply *a* vs. *the*, but rather weak vs. strong determiners (Enç 1991:16-17 n. 20, Diesing 1992:chap. 4)

- (18) a. Who<sub>i</sub> did she direct {∅, several, a few, many, two} movies about t<sub>i</sub>?  
 b. \*Who<sub>i</sub> did she direct {most, every, each, these} movie(s) about t<sub>i</sub>?

- (19) a. What<sub>i</sub> book did he read {∅, several, a few, many, two} reviews of t<sub>i</sub>?  
 b. \*What<sub>i</sub> book did he read {most, every, each, these} review(s) of t<sub>i</sub>?

Specificity Condition effects are also seen in relative clause/PP extraposition from DP (Reinhart 1987:148, Diesing 1992:75, also Gueron 1980:sect. 4.3).<sup>1</sup>

- (20) a. Jack gave {a,  $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} present(s)  $t_i$  to Nora [that he wanted to keep for himself]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
 b. \*Jack gave {the, most, every, each, these} present(s)  $t_i$  to Nora [that he wanted to keep for himself]<sub>*i*</sub>.
- (21) a. {An,  $\emptyset$ , Several, A few, Many, Two} actress(es)  $t_i$  arrived on the 9:40 train [whom I later met]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
 b. \*{The, Most, Every, Each, These} actress(es)  $t_i$  arrived on the 9:40 train [whom I later met]<sub>*i*</sub>.
- (22) a. She directed {a,  $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} movie(s)  $t_i$  last year [about Bill Clinton]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
 b. \*She directed {the, most, every, each, these} movie(s)  $t_i$  last year [about Bill Clinton]<sub>*i*</sub>.
- (23) a. {A,  $\emptyset$ , Several, A few, Many, Two} review(s)  $t_i$  appeared last week [of Salman Rushdie's new novel]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
 b. \*{The, Most, Every, Each} review(s)  $t_i$  appeared last week [of Salman Rushdie's new novel]<sub>*i*</sub>.

The general effect of the Specificity Condition is to rule out extraction from strong DPs, while permitting extractions from weak DPs.

Returning to the determiner restrictions seen in ACCs, my suggestion is that these simply reflect the same phenomenon as that seen in (16)–(23):

- The derivation of an ACC with a *than*-phrase involves extraction from DP.
- The strong ACCs in (24b) thus violate the Specificity Condition.
- The weak ACCs in (24a) do not incur Specificity Condition violations.
- The derivation of (e.g.) *every better team* in (24c) does not involve extraction from DP, and thus cannot result in a Specificity Condition violation.

- (24) a. The Cardinals will play {a,  $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} better  $t_i$  team(s) [than the Cubs (will)]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
 b. \*The Cardinals will play {the, most, every, each, these} better  $t_i$  team(s) [than the Cubs (will)]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
 c. The Cardinals will play {the, most, every, each, these} better team(s).

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<sup>1</sup> Fox and Nissenbaum (1999) claim that Specificity Condition effects in extraposition are limited to cases of complement extraposition; in this, they disagree with the authors cited above, who also detect the relevant contrasts in cases of adjunct extraposition.

## 4 Some predictions

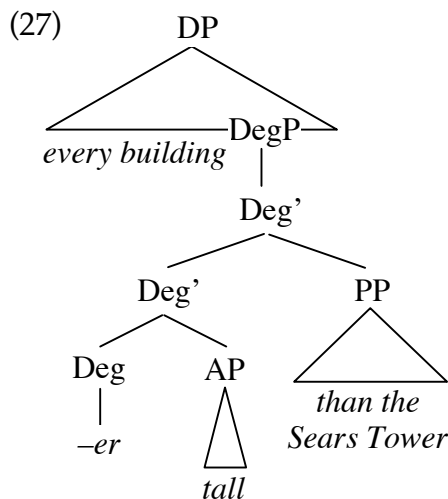
### 4.1 Extraposed vs. non-extraposed than-phrases

Other nominal constructions involving comparatives in which extraposition does not occur should not display any Specificity Condition effects, since their derivations do not involve extraction from DP.

A plausible test case is DPs in which a comparative construction occurs as a postnominal modifier. These may indeed be headed by strong determiners (Bresnan 1973:318, Lerner and Pinkal 1995:225–226).

- (25) a. Buildings taller than the Sears Tower were designed by I.M. Pei.  
b. {The, Most, Every, Each} building(s) taller than the Sears Tower was/were designed by I.M. Pei.
- (26) a. A letter more interesting than this one will be published in next week's paper.  
b. {The, Most, Every, Each} letter(s) more interesting than this one that is/are also not too vulgar will be published in next week's paper.

The word order of (e.g.) *every building taller than the Sears Tower* in (25b) is consistent with a derivation in which the than-phrase does not extrapose.



### 4.2 More on Specificity Condition effects

The weak/strong distinction between determiners and the possibility of extraction from DPs diverge in the case of partitives. Extraction from a partitive is generally unacceptable, even one headed by a weak determiner (Enç 1991:16–17 n. 20, Diesing 1992:149 n. 7).

- (28) a. Jack read {several, a few, many, two} of the reviews of Salman Rushdie's latest novel.  
 b. \*What<sub>i</sub> book did Jack read {several, a few, many, two} of the reviews of *t<sub>i</sub>*?
- (29) a. {Several, A few, Many, Two} of the reviews of Salman Rushdie's latest novel appeared last week.  
 b. \*{Several, A few, Many, Two} of the reviews *t<sub>i</sub>* appeared last week [of Salman Rushdie's latest novel]<sub>i</sub>.

Partitive ACCs are also ill-formed when a *than*-phrase is present; suppression of the *than*-phrase restores grammaticality.

- (30) a. \*I met {several, a few, many, two} of the more intelligent *t<sub>i</sub>* students [than you (did)]<sub>i</sub>.  
 b. I met {several, a few, many, two} of the more intelligent students.
- (31) a. \*The Cardinals will play {several, a few, many, two} of the better *t<sub>i</sub>* teams [than the Cubs (will)]<sub>i</sub>.  
 b. The Cardinals will play {several, a few, many, two} of the better teams.

#### 4.3 Related constructions

Other nominal constructions which plausibly involve extraposition from an attributive modifier phrase should be sensitive to the weak/strong distinction.

A complication: most adjectives do not allow their complements to appear after the NP when they occur preminally, regardless of the determiner.

- (32) a. Nora is proud of her son.  
 b. \*Nora is a proud woman of her son.  
 (cf. *Nora is a proud woman.*)
- (33) a. Martin and Luther are happy that you feel that way.  
 b. \*Martin and Luther are happy men that you feel that way.  
 (cf. *Martin and Luther are happy men.*)

Some adjectives that do allow their complements to appear after the NP:

- the comparative-like adjectives *similar* and *different*
- so-called *tough*-adjectives (e.g., *difficult*) (see also Moltmann 1993:332)

- (34) Our situation is similar to the one faced by the Donner expedition 150 years ago.

- (35) a. In {a,  $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two } similar  $t_i$  situation(s) [to our current one]<sub>i</sub>, rescue teams managed to find the victims in time.  
 b. \*In {the, most, every, each, these} similar  $t_i$  situation(s) [to our current one]<sub>i</sub>, rescue teams managed to find the victims in time.  
 c. In {the, most, every, each, these} similar  $t_i$  situation(s), the rescuers managed to find the victims in time.
- (36) This wine is different than the one I tasted yesterday.
- (37) a. At today's soiree, you'll taste {a,  $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} different  $t_i$  wines [than you tasted yesterday]<sub>i</sub>.  
 b. \*At today's soiree, you'll taste {the, most, every, each, these} different  $t_i$  wine(s) [than you tasted yesterday]<sub>i</sub>.  
 c. At today's soiree, you'll taste {most, every, each, these} different  $t_i$  wine(s).
- (38) This problem is difficult to solve.
- (39) a. Jack put {a,  $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} difficult  $t_i$  problem(s) [to solve]<sub>i</sub> on the exam.  
 b. \*Jack put {the, most, every, each, these} difficult  $t_i$  problem(s) [to solve]<sub>i</sub> on the exam.

The analysis of ACCs proposed here can be straightforwardly extended to account for the parallel patterns in (35), (37), and (39).

## 5 Concluding remarks

*Wh*-movement out of DPs is also sensitive to one's choice of verb. In particular, *wh*-movement from objects of so-called verbs of destruction is not fully acceptable, even when these DPs are headed by weak determiners.

- (32) a. Who<sub>i</sub> did Jack paint a portrait of  $t_i$ ?  
 b. ?\*Who<sub>i</sub> did Jack destroy a portrait of  $t_i$ ?
- (33) a. Who<sub>i</sub> did you read an article by  $t_i$ ?  
 b. ?\*Who<sub>i</sub> did you tear up an article by  $t_i$ ?

However, ACCs may appear with *than*-phrases when they occur as objects of these verbs.

- (34) I destroyed an uglier  $t_i$  picture [than you (did)]<sub>i</sub>.
- (35) Jack tore up larger  $t_i$  telephone books [than Nora (did)]<sub>i</sub>.

A hypothesis: the verbal sensitivity seen in (32)–(33) is limited to *wh*-movement, and does not affect extraposition from DP.

Some confirming evidence: relative clause/PP extraposition from objects of verbs of destruction is also acceptable.

(36) Jack destroyed some books  $t_i$  last week [that he shouldn't have],<sub>i</sub>.

(37) I tore up an article  $t_i$  this morning [by the guy who's presenting later today],<sub>i</sub>.

ACCs thus provide a new tool to investigate the nature of the constraints that limit extraction from DP:

- Some constraints (e.g., weak/strong sensitivity triggered by the Specificity Condition) affect all extractions from DP.
- Other constraints (e.g., verbal sensitivity) only affect some extractions.

Some issues for further investigation:

- is there independent evidence to support the hypothesis that *than*-phrase extraposition in ACCs targets DP (and not NP)?
- why is extraposition from attributive modifier phrases so limited as to apply only to comparative, comparative-like, and *tough*-adjectives?

## Appendix: Previous approaches to determiner restrictions in ACCs

One common approach (Bresnan 1973, Hendrick 1990, Moltmann 1993): reduce the determiner restrictions in ACCs to those seen in related constructions below.

- (38) a. I've never eaten that big a piece of cake.  
b. \*I've never eaten that big the piece of cake.
- (39) a. I've never eaten as big a piece of cake as Bill (did).  
b. \*I've never eaten as big the piece of cake as Bill (did).
- (40) a. How big a piece of cake did you eat?  
b. \*How big the piece of cake did you eat?

(cf. also *too big* {*a*, \**the*} *piece of cake*; *so big* {*a*, \**the*} *piece of cake*)

However, whereas any weak determiner is permitted in ACCs (cf. (7a)–(9a)), only the determiner *a* is permitted in these related constructions.<sup>2</sup> Thus, these accounts provide no ready explanation for the difference between (7a)–(9a), on the one hand, and (41)–(43) on the other.

- (41) \*I've never eaten that big { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} pieces of cake.
- (42) \*I've never eaten as big { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} pieces of cake as Bill (did).
- (43) \*How big { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} pieces of cake did you eat?

(cf. also \**too big* { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} *pieces of cake*; \**so big* { $\emptyset$ , several, a few, many, two} *pieces of cake*)

A semantic explanation (Beil 1997): strong ACCs presuppose that a comparison class from which the compared individuals are drawn is contextually available (cf. (44)–(45)). Weak ACCs carry no such presupposition (cf. (45)–(46)).

- (44) Of those cars, Sue bought one of them.  
The next day, George bought {the, every} faster car.
- (45) Sue bought a car.  
#The next day, George bought {the, every} faster car.
- (46) Sue bought a car.  
The next day, George bought {a, several} faster car(s).

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<sup>2</sup> Moltmann (1993:329) considers and rejects the claim that any weak determiner may head an ACC; her conclusion is based on (i), in which an ACC is headed by a (weak) cardinal determiner.

(i) \*Three taller men than Mary met yesterday entered the room.

Note, though, that acceptable ACCs headed by cardinal determiners are also possible, as in (ii).

(ii) The Cubs ended up only playing three better teams than the Cardinals (did).

However, the presence of a comparison class does nothing to improve the acceptability of strong ACCs when a *than*-phrase is present (cf. (44)~(47)). Thus, whatever the validity of this proposal regarding the differences between (44)–(46), it does not account for the full range of facts considered here.

- (47) Of those cars, Sue bought one of them.  
\*The next day, George bought {the, every} faster car than Sue (did).

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