No need for the Degree Abstraction Parameter in Móorè

As observed by Vanderelst (2007), Beck et al. (2009), degree abstraction configurations in languages like English, including subcomparatives (*The door is longer than the table is wide*) and attributive comparatives (*John bought a heavier dog than Mary*), are translated into Móorè (Gur, Burkina Faso) using constructions lacking degree abstraction. Beck et al. (2009) attribute these differences to a negative setting of the Degree Abstraction Parameter (DAP) in Móorè. We argue that the patterns in Mòoré are predictable based on its comparative morphosyntax.

First, subcomparatives by definition involve a clausal standard. But Móorè comparatives expect phrasal rather than clausal standards (1). The comparative expressed with a verbal morpheme *yʋd* 'exceed' which subcategorizes for an nominal complement. The complement can be either a simple NP or a nominalized clause marked by the complementizer *sẽn*. This subcategorization requirement explains the lack of subcomparatives (cf. (2a) and (2b)).

(1)   A Bill ya woko n yʋd   {a John/máám sẽ dá   tẽed-a}.
          PM Bill is long N exceed PM John/1SG   SEN PAST think-AFF
          'Bill is taller than John/I thought.'

(2)   a.   The boat is wider than Mary is tall.
        b.   koo-m   kogl-g ya béd-ré n yííd   a   Mary wógl-m-ã
             water-CL boat-CL COP big-CL N exceed 3SG Mary long-CL-DEF

Second, *yʋd* 'exceed' is used in a predicate-chaining structure involving the linker *n* (Peterson 1971). Due to this, comparative predicates are too heavy to be used as direct attributive modifiers. Attributive comparatives are therefore translated using relative clauses as in (3b) or (3c).

(3)   a.   John bought a heavier dog than Mary did.
        b.   A John raa   baaga [CP ya zɪsgo n yʋd   a Mary].
             PM John buy-AFF dog   [is heavy N exceed PM Mary]
             'John bought a dog that was heavier than Mary.'
        c.   A John raa   baaga [CP ya zɪsgo n yʋd   a Mary rẽnda   ].
             PM John buy-AFF dog   [is heavy N exceed PM Mary the.one.of]
             'John bought a dog that was heavier than Mary's.'

The finite clause boundary in the relative clause prevents a reading of the variant of (3b) equivalent to (3a), as it blocks movement of *n yʋd a Mary* to a high scope position. Notice that while *ya* can be omitted in simple attributive modification as in *dó wokò* 'a long stick' (cf. *dóor sẽ ya wókò* 'a stick which is long') (Peterson 1971), its presence is obligatory in (3b). Hence the impossibility of direct attributive modification, and the requirement for a relative clause, is specific to comparative predicates.

While we know of no unambigous positive evidence for the existence of degree abstraction in Móorè, these independent factors obviate the need for DAP in order to account for the behavior of Móorè degree constructions. This paper thus adds to the growing doubt that there is a parameter that regulates cross-linguistic variation in the availability of lambda abstraction over a degree variable.

References

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