

Comparative paths to an optimal interpretation

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We want to focus on a class of discourse comparatives that has not drawn much attention in the literature:

- (1) a. Every match doesn't get *easier*
- b. Elk jaar worden de eindexamens *gemakkelijker*
 each year get the final exams easier
 'The final exams get easier each year'
- c. Die lockere Stadt schloss sich *enger und enger* um ihn, sie saugte ihn in
 sich hinein. Der Lärm wuchs, *höher* schienen sich die Häuser zu wachsen,
 grauer wurden ihre Fassaden, *eiliger* liefen die Menschen
- d. Wolves get *bigger* as you go north from here
- e. The crack gets *wider* at the north gate
- f. The *higher* his stakes, the *lower* his expectations
- g. *More* goods are carried *faster*

Consider (1a) that was uttered by the tennis player Layton Hewitt in an interview in May 2004. What Hewitt means is that in the course of the tournament the matches become more difficult, i.e. each match is more difficult than the previous one. Discourse comparatives are comparatives without an explicit *than*-clause. Usually the compared element can be recovered from the context. Yet, the examples in (1) get interpreted independent of context. The intuition is that the comparatives are 'reflexive' in a special way: an object is compared to itself, but with respect to different moments of time, positions, parts or stages. How does this interpretation arise? Our explanation is based on the interaction of two constraints, *DOAP*, a general constraint in favour of anaphoricity, and *Principle B*, a constraint against identity. We will show that the optimal interpretation of the examples in (1) is the result of a *compromise* between these two constraints when they are in conflict.

DOAP favours anaphoric interpretations over non-anaphoric ones. Notoriously, linguistic elements can be left unexpressed ('deleted') if their interpretation is recoverable from the context. Hence, if an implicit compared element can be anaphorically linked to an element in the context (either linguistically given, or else accommodated from the context) than *DOAP* is satisfied. The second constraint involved is *Principle B*. In Hendriks & de Hoop (2001) *Principle B* is introduced as a soft constraint on interpretation. This principle accounts for the strong tendency found in language that a semantic relation is preferably established between *different* objects, which explains why the implicit *than*-clause gets a different interpretation in (2) than in (3):

- (2) Jane smokes more than Jacky, but Robert drinks more.
(3) Jane smokes more than Jacky, but Jacky drinks more.

As for (2), another constraint, *Parallelism*, favours the use of the parallel compared element from the first conjunct of the coordination structure to interpret the implicit compared element from the second conjunct, such that one obtains the reading ‘Jane smokes more than Jacky, but Robert drinks more than Jacky’ for (2). In (3), however, satisfaction of *Parallelism* would lead to a violation of *Principle B* (‘Jacky drinks more than Jacky’) and apparently, this does not happen. The result is a reading where *Parallelism* is violated while *Principle B* is satisfied (‘Jane smokes more than Jacky, but Jacky drinks more than Jane’). Note that the optimal readings of (2) and (3) both satisfy *DOAP* as well.

Obviously, in the examples in (1) the constraints *DOAP* and *Principle B* are in conflict. For instance, in (1a) there is only one potential antecedent for the implicit compared element and this would be the noun phrase *every match*. So, satisfaction of *DOAP* would lead to a reflexive interpretation (‘Every match is more difficult than itself’). That is not the interpretation we get, however. (Note that the same would hold for a comparative like *as difficult as*, so the problem is not just that a match cannot be easier or more difficult than itself.) We claim that *Principle B* is responsible for the fact that (1a) is not interpreted as ‘Every match is more difficult than itself’. However, if *DOAP* would be violated and *Principle B* satisfied, then we should get an interpretation that every match is more difficult than a new object, which cannot be recovered from the context, e.g. ‘Every match is more difficult than an exam’. However, this is not the interpretation we get either. We claim that in the optimal interpretation both *DOAP* and *Principle B* are satisfied to a certain degree. That is, they make a compromise. The compromise consists of creating a difference between the implicit and the explicit compared element by adding another dimension (time, space, another scale). In a sense, we may say that an ‘index’ is added: Every match_n is easier than the match_{n-1}. In that sense, the second compared element is not completely identical to the first one (thus, a violation of *Principle B* is avoided) while it still is anaphoric to it (thus, a violation of *DOAP* is avoided as well).

In our talk we will further explore the interaction with knowledge of the world and lexical meanings to determine the right interpretations, i.e., the right indexes (temporal, spatial, etc.). The indices are drawn from different ordered domains: time, space and another scale. In (1a,b) the indices are temporal, in (1c,d,e) spatial. The appearance of the city, the size of wolves and the width of the crack does not change along the temporal axis, but along a spatial path that leads further into town, further north, closer to the north gate, respectively. In (1f) the indices come from the scale of height: the degrees of height of the stakes provide the indices for comparing his expectations. There is now an important difference between the interpretation of the ordinary comparatives, which express the relative location of two objects on a scale, and the ‘implicit’ comparatives, which express ‘movement’ or a ‘path’ on a scale. We will discuss the semantic notion of ‘path’ on a scale of degrees in analogy with the spatial domain, referring to the semantics of prepositions and verbs, as well as the notion of homomorphism, relating paths to time, space, other scales and also to objects distributed over the path.