Fully Elliptical Comparatives – David-Étienne Bouchard, University of Ottawa

The purpose of this work is to examine a type of degree construction in English that has, to my knowledge, never received specific attention. This construction is characterized by the appearance of a degree operator directly before an ellipsis site introduced by *so*. I call these fully elliptical comparatives.

(1) John is tall, (even) more so than Bill.

I will argue that despite appearances, the degree operator in (1) does not quantify over a degree variable introduced by a copy of the gradable predicate *tall* in the ellipsis site. Rather, I propose that *more* quantifies over delineations, largely in the sense of Barker (2002), and states that the set of delineations that make *Bill is tall* true is a proper subset of those that make *John is tall* true. This is meant to capture two surprising properties of this construction: the fact that degree operators in fully elliptical comparatives can be associated with any vague predicate, not only with ordinary gradable predicates, and the potentially non-local relation between the degree operator and the elided vague predicate. Both of these properties are unexpected under an analysis that would attribute to (1) the same LF as the non-elliptical (2), a sentence (mostly) synonymous with (1) that raises no special problem for semantic theories of the comparatives, such as Heim (2001)’s or Kennedy (1999)’s.

(2) John is tall, and John is taller than Bill.

Fully elliptical comparatives require a vague predicate somewhere in their antecedent. Filling in the adjective’s degree argument in (1) with a measure phrase yields an unacceptable sentence, for example:

(3) *John is six feet tall, (even) more so than Bill.

Surprisingly, if the antecedent is already in the comparative, the result is still acceptable, as shown in (4), which is interpreted as stating that John’s (positive) difference in height with Bill is even greater than Eric’s. This is turn entails that John is taller than Eric, who is taller than Bill.

(4) John is taller than Bill, (even) more so than Eric.

What this shows is that it would not be possible to analyze fully elliptical comparatives as having an LF where the ellipsis site at *so* is identical to the antecedent clause, with the degree operator lowered next to the gradable adjective, in the manner shown in (2). In (4), this would yield the ungrammatical (5).

(5) *John is taller than Bill, and John is more taller than Eric.

Rather, in (4), it appears that *more* targets the implicit differential argument of the comparative morpheme in the antecedent, saying that it is greater for John than for Eric. Indeed, the sentence becomes unacceptable if we overtly express a differential argument:

(6) *John is four inches taller than Bill, (even) more so than Eric.

A similar problem arises with (5), where there is no room to lower *more* in the ellipsis site because *a lot* does not have the syntactic properties that allow it to combine with comparatives (7).

(7) John has a lot of money, even more so than Bill.

(8) *John has a lot of money, and John has more a lot of money than Bill.

Thus, bare gradable adjectives (1), comparatives without overt differentials (4) and vague determiners like *a lot* (7) are all adequate licensors for fully elliptical comparatives when they appear in the antecedent clause. What all these things have in common is that their interpretation involves reference to an undetermined degree. Gradable adjectives and vague determiners both require some standard of evaluation to be fixed by the context, while the semantics of comparatives without overt differentials can simply be thought of as involving existential quantification over a non-null differential degree (cf. von Stechow 1984). In all cases, fully elliptical comparatives target this non-specified value, which is something that ordinary comparatives cannot do in the case of vague determiners and differentials.

Another problem with the view that a fully elliptical comparative like (1) involves the same LF as (2) is that the required predicate with an open degree value can be embedded fairly deeply in the antecedent. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to construct a derivation where the antecedent will be of the right form to license the appropriate ellipsis.

Suppose that we adopt Heim (2001)’s semantics for comparatives. The ellipsis site at *so* must denote the set of degrees to which John is tall, but there is no constituent in the antecedent with this denotation. Since the adjective *tall* in the matrix clause is in the bare form, it must be interpreted via the POS operator. Still it could be claimed that POS moves to the top of the clause, leaving a type-d trace and
producing the right kind of antecedent for the ellipsis site. Although there is some precedent for movement of POS (cf. Matushansky 2002; Schwarz 2010), it is not an acceptable solution. This is because it is possible to embed the gradable adjective, and thus the POS operator with it, in a relative clause island, and the analysis that we are currently contemplating would require it to move out of this island in order to produce the right kind of antecedent for the ellipsis:

(9) John married a girl who has weird tastes in music, even more so than Bill.

The meaning of this sentence that concerns us is the one where John’s wife and Bill’s wife are compared in terms of the weirdness of their tastes in music. Note that this meaning is not shared by the ordinary comparative counterpart of this sentence, where the tastes in music of John’s wife and of Bill (rather than Bill’s wife) are compared.

(10) John married a girl who has weirder tastes that Bill.

In order to get the right ellipsis site at so, it would be necessary for the POS operator in the relative clause to raise to the top of the matrix, in violation of standard restrictions on movement. Similarly, the ellipsis site after Bill would need to contain a copy of the full VP married a girl who has t-weird tastes in music with a type-d trace before the gradable predicate weird, which again could only be constructed by vacating the adjective’s degree argument position in the antecedent by an illicit movement operation.

Taken together, I believe these facts show that fully elliptical comparatives do not involve any direct syntactic relation between the degree operator and some lower elliptical gradable predicate. Rather, borrowing from Barker (2002) and Lewis (1970), I claim that more quantifies over DELINEATIONS, which are features of the context in a dynamic framework that provide standards of evaluations for vague predicates, simplifying somewhat. Here I extent the notion to all non-specified degree values, including the implicit differential in comparatives. Basically (1) is interpreted as stating that all delineations that make Bill is tall true also make John is tall true, and there is at least one delineation that make only the latter true. Much as in Klein (1982)’s semantics, this guarantees that John must be taller than Bill.

The reasoning is the same for (4) and (7). (4) is true iff the set of differentials d that make Eric is d-taller than Bill true is a proper subset of those that make John is d-taller than Bill true. This is fine as long as we adopt an “at-least” semantics for gradable adjectives, meaning that for all differentials d and d’ such that d>d’, if John is d-taller than Bill is true, then John is d’-taller than Bill is also true. (7) is true iff the set of standards for a lot that make Bill has a lot of money true is a proper subset of those that make John has a lot of money true.

Furthermore, (9) no longer requires any movement out of the relative clause. This is because under the current analysis the degree operator does not need to “reach into” the proposition to access the gradable predicate’s degree argument. The ellipsis site simply needs to be parallel to the entire antecedent clause, rather than to a lambda abstract over some embedded degree variable.

In summary, I claim that fully elliptical comparatives are unlike ordinary degree constructions in that they do not involve quantification over degrees, but over delineations. Somewhat informally, fully elliptical comparatives quantify over ways of making a vague proposition precise. The fact that various kinds of vague predicates are adequate licensers for this construction suggest that they are all sensitive to the same type of operations, and hence that they all get their value from the same source, namely from delineations here.

References