

Comparatives and Inversion: A (Necessarily) Diachronic Account

Synopsis: The focus of this paper is on so-called comparative inversion (CI), as in (1).

(1) Julia's early-morning class is more talkative than **is her late-evening class**.

Capitalizing on (Haeberli 2002), we propose a non-standard, historically consistent solution:

(2) *Comparative*: [_{CP} Comp Op... [_{TP}Subj₁/Ø T[=fin.verb/Aux/etc] .. [_{VP} **Subj₂** *t_v* ...]]]

The paper analyzes structural developments of comparative clauses (CC) in qualitative and quantitative terms (YCOE, PPCME2, PPCME). We argue that in “inverted” CC, instead of both T and subject moving, none of the two is displaced. The solution is not only a simplifying one, but also strongly supported by a series of facts in the history of English. Further, we eliminate two alternative factors as putative key culprits in the decrease (and notably not decrease) of CI: V-to-I and “V2”. Finally, the paper puts forth a derivative but we think strong argument for the importance of the diachronic view in probing CC up to ModE.

CC are a neglected topic in diachronic studies despite major insights in both fields since (van Kemenade 1987; Bresnan 1973). Some interesting CC properties are, moreover, shared by OE; e.g. the scope issue discovered by Heim (2001); in (3), QP scopes out (as context shows).

(3) Næfre ic maran geseah eorla ofer eorþan ðonne **is eower sum** (*Beowulf*, III.247)

never I greater seen of warriors on earth than is of-you one

What about their basic syntax? We first show that CC in OE and ME had a type of CI with full DPs. Two immediate diachronic scenarios/questions are: Does CI show (S1) a steady decline towards ModE due to receding verb-movement; or rather (S2) a development “on the rise”, which then requires an independent explanation? We quantitatively argue against both S1 and S2. CI frequencies significantly display ups and downs. While some of the oscillations may be due to focus, pragmatic and textual properties, we narrow down on structural properties in this paper and argue: CI is, w.r.t. syntax, best accounted for by the history of the low subject (Haeberli 2002). **Stabilizing head-movement vs. CI.** Traditionally, CI is T-to-C. While inversion in better-studied contexts (topicalization, questions, etc.) disappears or becomes obligatory (optionality only during change; Kroch 1989; Speyer 2005; Yang 2001;), CI stays optional. For OE/ME, the received CI view translates as V-to-T or V-to-C (Pintzuk 1991). However, the possibility of the *in situ* subject can account for CI simply and eliminates the vexing optionality of head movement. Data such as (1) though, discussed in the previous CC literature, could not establish the simpler alternative. We first present some stronger ModE evidence; viz. from thus far neglected subjectless CC, auxiliary+verb clusters (cf., e.g., Huddleston & Pullum 2002), and review the most relevant focus and heaviness facts. **Changes and constants.** Assuming that grammars change in scientifically explainable and (once understood) predictable ways (cf. Kroch et al. 2000, Roberts 1993; a.o.), some key CC issues can be tested through syntactic diachronic reasoning, viz. by drawing on a set of new observations, sketched as follows. 1st, there is a dramatic fall in the frequencies of CI between the last period of ME (M4) and eModE. This may seem up the alley of a scenario that places main weight on the loss of verb-movement, but there are problems. Crucially, many comparatives are (naturally) attested with the copula (at all times). But since the copula has not stopped moving in the modern varieties of English, we cannot blame the quantitative steep decline after M4, which is mirrored in the sub-study on the copula, on loss of V-to-T. 2nd, even though there is no full agreement on the loss of V-to-T, one would run into serious timing issues (under any major account) if one tried to relate CI decline to the loss of V-to-T. Further, CI in OE was entirely consistent with the low subject hypothesis in that (unlike so-c. operator inversion of questions, *þa* etc) it never applied to pronouns. This rules V-to-C out. 4th, CI frequencies increase between OE/M1. However, it is easy to show that the increase cannot be ascribed (either here or in later ME) to the general increase in pronoun-inversion (generalized movement to C) starting in later ME. 5th, the OE/ME increase is in line with the studied progressing loss of head-final structures in ME. **Summary:** Inversion does not always conform to tradition (cf, eg, Culicover & Levine 2001). In the case of CI, we adduce evidence drawing on a corpus-study for (i) a low subject, (ii) less movement than typically assumed. Syntax need thereby not take recourse to optional head-movement or any *sui-generis* process.