Chinese has clausal comparatives: a first look at the syntax of bi-comparatives in Mandarin

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There are two contradictory arguments in the literature on whether Chinese has clausal bi-comparatives. Some scholars argue that there is a distinction between phrasal bi-comparatives vs. clausal bi-comparatives in Mandarin (Liu, 1996; Erlewine 2007; among others), as similar to the distinction found in English comparatives (Handamer, 1973; Heim, 1985; Kennedy, 1999; among others), whereas some others argue that all comparatives in Mandarin are phrasal rather than clausal (e.g. Lin 2009) and this latter phrasal-comparative-only claim argues that multiple-topic comparatives in Mandarin consist of multiple DegP-shells/phrases, e.g. (1a) having a structure in (1b).

(1) a. Zhangsan zai chuang-shang bi Lisi zai zhuozi-shang tiao-de gao. / Zhangsan at bed-up BI Lisi at desk-up jump-PART tall / ‘Zhangsan jump higher on the bed than Lisi jump on the desk.’

b. Zhangsan [ VP at bed-up [ DegP bi Lisi [ DegP e at desk-up [ VP jump-PART tall ] ] ] ]

In this paper I show that the phrasal-comparative-only claim is not sufficiently reliable and cannot avoid overgeneration, by examining but not limited to the following examples.

(2) *Zhe-gen shengzi jinnian bi na-gen shengzi qunian chang (liang-cun).
   this-CL rope this.year BI that-CL rope last.year long (two-feet)
   Intended reading: ‘this rope used this year is longer (by two feet) than that one used last year.’

(3) a. Zhangsan ji bu xihuan chi, yu xihuan chi. / Zhangsan chicken not like eat, fish like eat
   ‘Chicken, Zhangsan does not like to eat, but fish, Zhangsan likes to eat.’

b. *Zhangsan yu bi ji xihuan chi. / Zhangsan fish BI chicken like eat
   Intended reading: ‘Zhangsan likes to eat fish more than chicken.’

The multiple DegP-shell structure by Lin (2009) will incorrectly predict that (2) and (3) are grammatical, due to, respectively, the fulfillment of semantically parallel conditions in (2) (e.g. jinnian ‘this year’ vs. qunian ‘last year’) as well as the grammaticality of the canonical patient-as-sub-topic sentence in Mandarin as in (3a). In terms of the limited, I propose a new analysis in this paper. I argue that in Chinese multiple-topic comparatives, bi is a conjunction rather than a DegP head, connecting two separate DegP-shells realized as two clauses, each of which has to be syntactically licensed within its clause boundary, unlike phrasal comparatives in which bi is head of the DegP. Not only can this proposed analysis avoid the aforementioned overgeneralization, but it can also explain why the position of bi can be taken up by the raising adjective gao ‘tall’ in transitive comparatives in (4a) (following Grano & Kennedy, 2010), but this can never happen in multiple-topic comparison like (4b).

(4) a. Zhangsan gao Lisi liang-cun. / Zhangsan tall Lisi two-feet / ‘Zhangsan is two feet taller than Lisi.’

b. *Zhangsan jinnian gao Lisi qunian liang-cun / Zhangsan this.year tall Lisi last.year two-feet

In this paper I will focus more on the analysis from the perspective of syntax. The proposed structure of the bi-comparative is supported by examining canonical conjunctional patterns such as those consisting of conjunctions gen ‘together with’ and he ‘and’, the structures of which well parallel with the bi-comparative, cf. (1a) and (5):

(5) a. Zhangsan zai chuang-shang gen Lisi zai zhuozi-shang tiao-de gao. / Zhangsan at bed-up together with Lisi at desk-up jump-PART tall / ‘Zhangsan jump higher on the bed than Lisi jump on the desk.’

b. Zhangsan [ VP at bed-up [ DegP gen Lisi [ DegP e at desk-up [ VP jump-PART tall ] ] ] ]
Other evidence examined in this paper from positioning of negation and adverbs, topic deletion and passivisation, etc, also supports the distinction between clausal vs. phrasal comparatives in Mandarin.

Selected bibliography:


