

“Reduced clausal comparatives in Arabic and Slavic”

This talk describes evidence from Arabic supporting Pancheva's (2006) argument, based on Slavic, for the existence of a kind of reduced clausal comparative construction. The literature on comparatives recognizes two kinds of comparative construction. In the 'clausal' comparative, the standard-marker ('than' in English) introduces a whole clause, in which the gradable term has been elided, as in “Mary is taller than [CP John is tall]”. In the 'phrasal' comparative, a bare DP follows “than”, i.e. “Mary is taller than [DP John]”, and the gradable property that is attributed to John is retrieved from the main clause in the semantic composition. Pancheva claims that phrasal comparatives are actually reduced clausal comparatives in which the clause lacks a CP layer and consists instead of just a subject and a null predicate “[e]” that is identified with an antecedent at LF, i.e. “Mary is taller than [SC John [e]]” (SC=“small clause”). In this case, the subject of the SC gets case under ECM from “than” (genitive in most Slavic languages).

As in most Slavic languages, Arabic clausal comparatives have a *wh*-element in the standard clause. One says literally “Mary is taller than what John is”, and the subject of the standard clause “John” has its usual nominative case. And as in most Slavic languages, in the phrasal comparative, the standard consists of a single DP in the genitive case. But Arabic displays another construction that I argue corresponds to Pancheva's small clause comparative and supports a unification of clausal with phrasal comparatives. In it, the standard clause lacks a *wh*-element and consists of a genitive DP (as in the phrasal comparative) but also contains a remnant of ellipsis, as in “*fuhratu-hu qa:ʔimatun ʔala: l-masraḥ akḥar min-ha: ʕala: l-ʔadab*”, literally “Fame-his based on the-theater more from-it.GEN on the-literature”, meaning that his fame is based more on theater than it is on literature. The fragment PP “*ʔala: l-ʔadab*” (“on literature”) in the standard implies an elided predicate “*qa:ʔimatun*” (“based”), meaning the standard must be a whole clause. But then its subject, the genitive clitic pronoun “it” must be receiving genitive case by ECM from the standard marker “*min*” (literally “from”, corresponding to English “than”). I discuss constraints on this construction, the consequences for Slavic and for the typology of comparative constructions cross linguistically, especially the question of a whether a true phrasal comparative exists.