A Direct Analysis of Malagasy Phrasal Comparatives

**Introduction.** This paper investigates the syntax of comparatives in the Austronesian language Malagasy. Two types of analyses have been proposed for phrasal comparatives as in (1) in which the standard (the constituent following the equivalent of ‘than’) is a phrase:

(1) lava [noho [standard ilay zaza]] Rabe  
    long than that child Rabe  
    ‘Rabe is taller than that child.’

Under a **REDUCED CLAUSE ANALYSIS** (Heim 1985 and others), the standard is a clause and (1) is derived by applying ellipsis to the clausal structure, as in (2). Under a **DIRECT ANALYSIS** (Hankamer 1973, Hoeksema 1983, and others), the standard is a simple nominal, as in (3). The paper argues for a direct analysis of Malagasy comparatives and explores the consequences of this conclusion for theories of cross-linguistic variation in the syntax of comparatives.

(2) Reduced clause analysis  
    Rabe is taller [than [clause that child is tall]]

(3) Direct analysis  
    Rabe is taller [than [nominal that child]]

**Evidence.** First, the reduced clause analysis leads to an expectation that unreduced clausal standards might be possible. The direct analysis precludes clausal patterns. The examples in (4) show that there are no comparatives in Malagasy in which the standard shows overt clausal syntax, in contrast to their grammatical English translations:

(4) a. *nividy boky betsaka [noho nividy Rasoa] Rabe  
    buy book many than buy Rasoa Rabe  
    ‘Rabe bought more books than Rasoa bought.’

   b. *nividy laoranjy betsaka [noho nividy akondro izy] Rabe  
    buy orange many than buy banana 3SG Rabe  
    ‘Rabe bought more oranges than he bought bananas.’

Second, the reduced clause analysis claims that there should be a correspondence between well-formed standards and well-formed constituents of a simple, non-comparative clause. There are no direct correspondences however. For example, the bracketed standard *ny androany* ‘the today’ in (5a) is not a possible adverbial phrase in a simple clause, (5b).

(5) a. nijinja vary betsaka omaly noho [ny androany] ny mpiasa  
    harvest rice much yesterday than the today the worker  
    ‘The worker harvested more rice yesterday than today.’

   b. *nijinja vary ny mpiasa [ny androany]  
    harvest rice the worker the today  
    ‘The worker harvested rice today.’
Conversely, the grammatical adverbial in the simple clause in (6b) is not a possible standard, (6a).

(6) a. *nijinja vary betsaka omaly noho [androany] ny mpiasa
    harvest rice much yesterday than today the worker
    ‘The worker harvested more rice yesterday than today.’

b. nijinja vary ny mpiasa [androany]
    harvest rice the worker today
    ‘The worker harvested rice today.’

Finally, Hoeksema 1983 argues that clausal comparatives are a Negative Polarity Item (NPI) licensing environment while direct phrasal comparatives are not. In Malagasy, the NPI na dia iray aza ‘even one’ is an NPI but it is not licensed as a standard in comparatives:

(6) *tsy lava kokoa noho na dia iray aza Rabe
    NEG long more than even one Rabe
    ‘Rabe isn’t taller than even one (girl).’

The diagnostic indicates that Malagasy comparatives are not derived from reduced clauses. Other evidence comes from form-al restrictions on standards, the impossibility of subcomparatives, the impossibility of multiple standards, and standards originating in islands.

If the analysis is correct, Malagasy can be added to the small but growing list of languages that do not have reduced clausal comparatives (Hindi (Bhatt and Takahashi 2007), Chinese (Xiang 2003), Japanese (Kennedy 2009)). The paper concludes by asking why it does not, exploring proposals in Beck et al. 2004, Bhatt and Takahashi 2008, Kennedy 2009, and Keenan 2008.


