kuʃunaŋ trakuʃu (apples and peaches) – on the comparison of comparative expressions in structurally differing languages

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The German phrase *Äpfel und Birnen* may signal that one compares things that cannot or should not be compared. Its English counterpart *apples and oranges* is even more drastic, in so far as the two entities are essentially different, sharing only the shape, whereas the German pair stands for a difference in shape despite essential structural similarities. Similarities in shape often facilitate name derivation for unfamiliar items, cf. German *Apfelsinen*, similarly *trakuʃu* 'peach(es)' from *kuʃu* 'apple(s)' in Exot-ese (one of the many lesser-known, often structurally quite differing languages of the world).[1]

These examples illustrate a basic dilemma: when comparing non-identical items – which is the main purpose of a comparison – one has to neglect part of the difference and to abstract either from the outer, formal features or from the inner, seemingly more substantial features. Although scientific discourse has often enough looked down upon the naïve mind, capable only to compare the outer shape but not the essence, both approaches may be found in the linguistic literature, e.g. originally functional labels such as the High German PERFEKT are transferred on grounds of formal similarity to the southern dialects where the construction in question *functions as a preterite*, while the *perfect function* is filled with the so-called DOPPELTEN PERFEKT. Conversely, it is claimed by typologists that cross-linguistic comparison can only be based on meaning (Haspelmath 2004), following from which formal differences do not matter (much). Embedded nominalisation in Exot-ese, e.g., is thus often equated with relativisation in English, which is typically the only way to translate it appropriately. Note, however, the asymmetry in both practices: the dialects are described from the perspective of the 'standard variety', whereas lesser-known exotic languages are described from the perspective of linguistic 'standard languages' such as English (or, in earlier attempts: Latin). Both are not described as entities in their own right, nor are they ever accepted as descriptive models (or challenges).

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[1] While the varieties to be discussed in this presentation, namely Shamskat and Kenhat Ladakhi (Tibetan varieties spoken in Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, India) had been anonymised in order to allow a truely anonymous review, the problems to be discussed are of a more general nature.

This is not to say that meaning does not matter. In fact, even the modest tasks of translation or of describing (and thus understanding) an exotic language are based on the fundamental hermeneutic principle that however different the outer appearance (wording or structure), utterances are comparable as long as the intended or the conveyed meaning (the function) is the same, i.e. when referring to the same 'objective' situation.

How well this hermeneutic principle actually works may be demonstrated on the basis of a very small segment of linguistic utterances, namely comparative expressions of equality and difference. The situation in the outside world is quite manageable: We have two entities, A (the item to be compared) and S (the standard to which something is compared), to which we ascribe, for the sake of simplicity, a perceptible and measurable, i.e. scalable property X.

In English, scalar properties are typically expressed by adjectives or more precisely: adjectivals with nominal properties, and the relation of equality and similarity are expressed by the relators *as ... as* and *like*, while the relation of difference is expressed by the relator *than* and a comparative morpheme *-er* added to the adjective, hence *A is <u>as</u> X <u>as</u> S* (equality), *A is X <u>like</u> S* (similarity), or *A is X<u>er</u> <u>than</u> S*.

In Exot-ese, the situation is somewhat more complicated: To start with, this language did not originally possess basic adjectives, but only basic adjective-verbs (verbal adjectivals), which imply certain dynamic properties (inchoative, resultative), besides derived adjectives for states. The latter are used in comparative expressions of equality and similarity together with relators that correspond to *as* and *like*, but they cannot be used for a relation of difference. In some of the varieties, only certain forms of the verbal adjectival can be used. This holds also for analytic comparative constructions, since the quantitative adjectivals *more* or *less* are likewise of verbal character. The speakers of Exot-ese have thus to take refuge to a syntactical solution, namely to add a semantically opaque postposition to the S argument. As a result of this strategy, they also do not make use of a relator. The standard construction is: *S-Postposition*, *A <u>Xes</u>*. This might be interpreted as '<u>In relation to</u> S, A <u>Xes</u>'. Another, somewhat less felicitous paraphrase, missing out the dynamic character of the property itself, would be 'In relation to S, A differs with respect of a plus in X'.

Exot-ese differs from English in many other respects. E.g. the negation markers are obligatorily bound to a verb or its auxiliary and thus always operate on the whole clause. In the case of constituent negation (*nobody*, *not anybody*), an indefinite or limiting quantifier plus an emphatic conjunction must be used, e.g. *Anybody / A single person ever does not X in relation to S*, but I fear, neither alternative has the same logical entailments as the English sentence *Nobody is Xer than S*.

In English it is possible, formally at least, to exchange S and the negated item A: *A is Xer than nobody*. Such sentences are acceptable when *Xer than* is not meant to express a relation of properties but a direct relation between the items, e.g. *Something is better than nothing*. But in Exot-ese, we cannot, on formal grounds, exchange the negated item, simply because it does not exist. Like in the case of the comparative construction or the

constituent negation, we have to reformulate and reorder the various elements in order to arrive roughly at the intended meaning. Since we need a noun to which we can apply the postposition and since only sentences can be negated, we may take resort to an embedded nominalisation.

However, construction substitutes are often not very perfect matches, they may allow for certain ambiguities that are not there in the model (or vice versa). Even more, structural differences could well be symptoms of functional differences, which might become more evident when viewing the language in its entirety and not only a small segment. Finally, differences that might be still tolerable at an elementary level may accumulate, up to the moment where it is impossible to say, by any interpretative means or formal argument, whether the expressions in question can still be compared in a meaningful way, because it is no longer apparent that they still refer to (roughly) the same situation. In contrast to its English 'counterpart', the Exot-ese sentence *A Xes in relation to anybody nonexisting* is acceptable for some of the speakers even when expressing a relation of properties. This may be mainly due to the fact that it allows alternative interpretations, such as *A Xes in relation to anybody else* or *A is as X as nobody else*. But how do we know? If Exot-ese does not have constituent negation and also no true comparative, are we not actually comparing here *pears and peaches*?

Exot-ese gives ample opportunity for methodological discussions, concerning not only the comparability of exotic languages, but, more basically, the gathering and evaluation of linguistic evidence from badly documented non-written lesser-known languages of traditional societies. Even though this kind of fieldwork is not a very relevant topic in present-day linguistics, it may, if only as a worst-case scenario, shed some light on other experimental settings. Besides, the examples from Exot-ese may enhance the insight into the diversity of linguistic strategies to express comparative situations.

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