

# The uniformity of nominal and verbal comparatives

Alexis Wellwood  
*University of Maryland*

Theories of adjectival comparatives posit a measure function that relates individuals and degrees in an order-preserving way. If a measure function  $\mu$  is order-preserving, and if *Mary is more intelligent than John*, then  $\mu$  maps *Mary* to a higher degree on the scale associated with intelligence than it does *John*. The dimension of a given scale is idiosyncratic to the adjective—e.g., *tall* refers to degrees on a scale of height, *beautiful* to degrees on a scale of beauty. How uniform are comparatives across domains? What determines measure functions in nominal and verbal comparatives?

Hackl (2001) argues that the determiner *more* selects arguments which may be non-trivially, orderly mapped to degrees on a scale of increasing cardinality—singular count NPs are ruled out since individuals in these extensions would all be mapped to the (trivial) degree of one. We generalize Hackl's plurality requirement to include mass NPs, and discuss how, in general, lexical properties determine the scale: count NPs are compared by cardinality, mass NPs along some (usually non-cardinal) dimension. If *more girls than boys like chocolate*, the number of relevant girls/boys determines the truth value of the sentence. If *more wine than beer spilt on the floor*, the volume of wine spilt is greater than the volume of beer spilt. As Bale and Barner (2009) showed, however, grammatical context can override lexical factors: e.g., plural *-s* (i.e., count syntax) on mass NPs triggers obligatorily comparison in terms of cardinality, e.g. *John has more waters than Mary*.

We consider two parallels between the nominal and verbal domains: the count/mass distinction to the telic/atelic distinction (telic event descriptions are countable, whereas atelic event descriptions are usually not), and singular/plural morphology to grammatical aspect—perfective quantifies over a single event, and imperfective-habitual over a plurality of events (Ferreira 2005). If *Mary kicked the statue more than John did*, with a telic predicate, the number of kickings by Mary is compared to the number of kickings by John. In contrast, if *Mary ran more than John did*, with an atelic predicate, the relevant scale is underdetermined—either the number of events, or the temporal duration/spatial path of the event(s) is compared. We investigate whether adverbial *more* is constrained in the same ways as the determiner *more*: does it combine with perfective telic ('singular count') VPs? Is the scale for comparison determined by an interaction of lexical properties (atelic v. telic) and grammatical 'number' (perfective v. imperfective)?

We present novel data from English, Spanish, Bulgarian and Hindi, showing that similar restrictions on *more* appear to be in effect across the adjectival, nominal, and verbal domains. Our data and discussion suggest the desirability of a common semantics for *more* across these occurrences.

Bale, A. & Barner, D. (2009). The interpretation of functional heads: Using comparatives to explore the mass/count distinction. *Journal of Semantics*, 1-36.

Ferreira, M. (2005). *Event Quantification and Plurality*. PhD thesis, MIT. Boston MA.

Hackl, M. (2001). Comparative quantifiers and plural predication. In Megerdumian, K. and Bar-el, L. A., editors, *Proceedings of WCCFL XX*, Somerville, MA.: Cascadia.