

A phrasal analysis of explicit comparatives in Fijian

Introduction. Kennedy (2009) proposes that, across languages, comparatives vary according to whether they are *explicit* or *implicit*. Based on diagnostics from that work, it has been claimed that Fijian comparatives are always of the *implicit type* and that the language therefore lacks degrees (Pearson 2009). I show in this talk that this is not the correct conclusion to be drawn for Fijian, which does in fact have explicit comparatives. I argue that Fijian makes use of both implicit *and* explicit comparatives, and propose moreover a direct phrasal analysis for the latter type. This talk therefore contributes to our understanding of variation across comparative constructions in Austronesian – a family in which languages make use of explicit comparison (Malagasy; Potsdam 2011), implicit comparison (Samoan; Hohaus 2010), or both (Fijian) – as well as to recent work evaluating the status of degrees as a universal type across languages (e.g., Beck et al. 2009).

Background. Kennedy (2009) identifies two types of comparison strategies that are distinguishable by morphosyntactic properties. *Explicit* comparatives on the one hand make use of dedicated comparative morphology to express comparisons between degrees or individuals. *Implicit* comparatives on the other hand lack dedicated morphology and instead manipulate the context in such a way that the positive form of an adjective is ‘true of *x* and false of *y*’. The differences between the strategies are likewise correlated with a range of semantic properties that can differentiate them.

Explicit comparison. As pointed out by Pearson (2009), the primary strategy for comparison in Fijian comes in the form of a ‘separative’ comparative, in which the **gradable adjective** is bare, and in which the *standard of comparison* is marked by the preposition *mai* ‘from’, as in (1):

(1) na vatu oqo e **bibi** [PP *mai na vatu oqori*]

the rock this 3.SG heavy from the rock that

‘This rock is heavier than that rock.’

author’s notes

The standard marker *mai* is an example of dedicated comparative morphology, indicative of an explicit comparison strategy. Pearson argues, despite the fact that Fijian passes many of Kennedy’s (2009) diagnostics for explicit comparatives (e.g., i) the use of differential comparatives of the form ‘John is *one year* older than Mary’; ii) giving rise to crisp judgments), that comparatives like (1) have an implicit semantics and don’t make reference to degrees (Klein 1980). Pearson argues that Fijian comparatives cannot be explicit based on several pieces of data, e.g., the lack of a presupposition failure in (2), which arises in a language like English due to the fact that John is male.

(2) e **goneyalewa** qase ’o Meri mai-vei Jone

3.SG **girl** old the Meri from John

‘Mary is an older girl than John.’

Pearson (2009: 359)

Pearson takes examples like (2) as an indication that Fijian comparatives are more on a par with a type of *implicit* comparison in English of the form in (3), in which the presupposition does not hold:

(3) Compared to Mary, John is a tall guy.

Pearson (2009: 359)

Many of Pearson’s generalizations are however not robust, with examples such as (2) being rejected by other speakers (for whom the same presupposition failure arises that also arises in English).

Implicit comparison. Furthermore, it is well-documented in grammars that Fijian makes use of *conjoined* comparatives using ‘but’ (e.g., Milner 1967), which are a canonical type of implicit comparative construction in the sense of Kennedy (2009) in that they manipulate the context to establish comparison between two individuals. Testing the grammaticality of such sentences yields a positive result with my speaker, indicating that this comparison strategy is (still) available in Fijian:

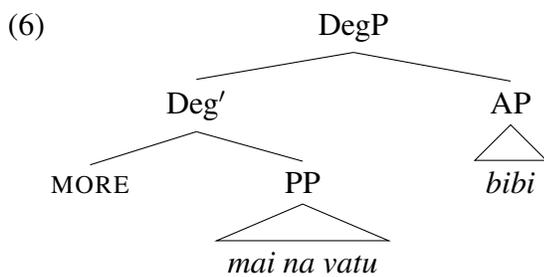
- (4) e bibi na vatu oqo, ka mamada na vatu oqori
 3.SG heavy the rock this, but light the rock that
 ‘This rock is heavier than that rock.’ (=lit. ‘This rock is heavy, but that rock is light.’)

Given that i) Fijian has comparative morphology; ii) Fijian does pass a number of Kennedy’s tests for explicit comparison; iii) the apparently implicit-type data are disputed by other native speaker judgments; and iv) Fijian makes use of an independent strategy for unequivocal implicit comparison of the conjoined type, I appeal to Occam’s razor and propose that separative comparatives in Fijian are in fact of the explicit type and require a degree-based analysis, pace Pearson (2009).

Analysis. I propose an analysis for separative comparatives in Fijian based on Potsdam’s (2011) syntactic analysis of separative comparatives in related Malagasy, as well as Bhatt & Takahashi’s (2011) semantics for direct comparison. I propose that i) the standard in separative comparatives is an individual, and ii) there is a silent comparative head MORE in the construction, which has the meaning in (5). MORE takes two individual arguments and a property of type $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$, and establishes that the degree to which this property holds of one individual does not hold of the other:

(5) $MORE(x)(P)(y) \leftrightarrow \exists d[P(y,d) \ \& \ \neg P(x,d)]$ modif. Bhatt & Takahashi (2011: 585)

For a comparative such as (1), the structure of the comparative is then as in (6), with a resulting



meaning for the entire proposition as shown in (7):

(7) $\exists d[heavy(\text{this rock}, d) \ \& \ \neg heavy(\text{that rock}, d)]$

The idea that there is a silent MORE in Fijian comparatives is supported by the fact that it is optionally pronounced by *cake*, otherwise meaning ‘up’ in the language, as shown in (8) (see also Milner 1976):

- (8) e katakata **cake** 'o Viti [PP mai-vei Peritaania]
 3.SG hot **more** the Fiji from Britain
 ‘Fiji is hotter than Britain.’ author’s notes

This analysis reflects the fact that Fijian makes use of purely phrasal (as opposed to reduced clausal) standards. As noted by Potsdam, one potential indication for a clausal source comes from mixed subcomparatives (e.g., ‘the window is wider than the door is tall’). These are not possible in Fijian, in which the standard must instead be expressed as a nominal argument, as in (9).

- (9) na katubaleka e raraba [PP mai-va [DP na baluvu ni katuba]]
 the window 3.SG wide from **the height of the door**
 ‘The window is wider than the height of the door.’ author’s notes

Conclusion. In sum, this talk counters recent claims by showing that Fijian makes use of implicit *and* explicit comparatives, and presents a direct phrasal analysis of Fijian separative comparatives. It is shown that, as a result of these findings, Fijian should not be counted as degreeless language.

References: Beck, S. et al. 2009. Crosslinguistic variation in comparison constructions. *in Linguistic Variation Yearbook*. Bhatt, R. and S. Takahashi. 2011. Reduced and unreduced phrasal comparatives. *in NLLT*. • Hohaus, V. 2010. The semantics of motion verbs and comparison in Samoan. *MA thesis, Tübingen*. • Kennedy, C. 2009. Modes of Comparison. *in CLS*. • Milner, G.B. 1976. Fijian Grammar. *Fiji Government Printing Dept*. • Pearson, H. 2009. How to do comparison in a language without degrees: a semantics for the comparative in Fijian. *in SuB*. • Potsdam, E. 2011. A direct analysis of Malagasy phrasal comparatives *in AFLA*.