

The comparative verb in Bumthang

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This talk will discuss the phenomenon of the ‘comparative verb’ in Bumthang, a Tibeto-Burman language from central Bhutan. The word order of comparative constructions has been a mainstay in typological literature (e.g. Greenberg’s Universal 22; Andersen 1983; Stassen 1985, 2013); however, the notion of a predicate which is ‘inherently comparative’ has been rarely discussed (McLaughlin 2004; Dixon 2008). Recent research into Bumthang shows there is a clear syntactically-definable class of comparative verbs, which intrinsically encodes the parameter (or ‘property’) and index of comparison without further derivation. Strikingly, they are less morphosyntactically marked than their positive adjectival counterparts, which goes against typological tendencies (Haspelmath 2008). This initial report on a rare cross-linguistic phenomenon will provide an insight into languages of the Himalayas and suggest a need for further research into the typology of comparison.

Bumthang exhibits ‘inherently comparative’ verbs which encode both parameter and index in a single, underived lexeme. These verbs are less morphosyntactically marked than adjectives with the corresponding positive meaning. This can be seen in (1) and (2), where *kar* ‘lighter’ takes the affix *-ti* to become *karti* ‘light grey’. Comparative verbs are found in semantic domains such as dimension, age, value and colour, with some verbs more restricted in function than others.

(1) *Utui kar-za.*
that lighter-IPFV
‘That is lighter.’

(2) *yak karti mu-nané...*
yak light.grey NEG.COP-COND
‘If there are no light grey yaks...’

The comparative verb construction is also morphosyntactically distinct from comparable constructions with other word classes. For example, in (3) the comparative clitic acts as a marker of the standard. However, verbal comparative constructions require the comparative verb *mang* ‘more than’ marked with the comparative clitic to encode index, such as in (4).

(3) *Utui pecha=wa kawang kar-za.*
that book=COMP lid lighter-IPFV
‘The lid is lighter than that book.’

(4) *Ngai banggala zhindi mang=wa ga.*
1SG.ERG chilli red more.than= COMP like.IRR
‘I like red chilli more.’

Comparative verbs are an underreported phenomenon in languages across the world. This talk will present new data from Bumthang in a first attempt to describe and define these verbs on a language-specific basis and within current typological frameworks. The comparative verb in Bumthang provides us with a counterexample to acknowledged typological tendencies and an additional strategy of coding comparison cross-linguistically.