

## ENGLISH PREDICATIONS OF COMPARISON<sup>1</sup>

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The phenomena to be discussed here form a part of the semantic process of grading. To say any of:

- (1) a. This boat is long.
- b. This boat is as long that one is.
- c. This boat is longer than that one is.
- d. This boat is the longest of all.

implies that the speaker has some property in mind (longitudinal dimension) which he regards as a continuum, and that he is able to place individual objects in relative positions along that continuum. Notice that grading is a semantic process, not a grammatical one, since one cannot classify words as gradable or not gradable. One must instead classify meanings as gradable or not gradable. Thus, while it is quite obvious from (1a—d) that *long* in the interpretation assumed above is gradable, it is easy to think up situations in which other uses of that word are not gradable. Thus if we had a large number of boats and were trying to categorize them into two categories, those which would survive a storm at sea (long boats) and those which would not (short boats), we would find ourselves saying sentences like (1a) but not sentences like (1b—d).

The purpose of this paper is to describe in a unified framework the semantic contrasts involved in predications of comparison (such as 1a—d above), to use these contrasts to explain certain semantic restrictions on comparison, and finally to relate these semantic restrictions to restrictions on the expression of comparison in English.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefited from a discussion of its major points with M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan in its early formative stage. John Rohsenow and Kenneth Pike commented on a later version.

The basic semantic system is presented in diagram 1, and sentences illustrating each of the options involving the overt expression of the standard of comparison are given in the appendix. The diagram is to be read in the following way. Comparisons are first divided into comparisons within a group and comparisons between items. Comparisons between items require three simultaneous choices; one must choose the standard of comparison, one must choose whether to mention that standard overtly in the sentence, and one must choose the relation the item being compared has to the standard of reference. Each of these choices contains various subchoices, thus one may choose as a standard of comparison some norm, or one may choose a specific. If one chooses a specific, it may be a specific object or a specific task or result. The numbers of the examples in the appendix are keyed to the choices presented in the diagram. So that, for instance, an example whose number begins with 1 uses a norm as a standard of reference, while an example which has a number which begins with 2 involves a specific object as a standard of comparison, etc.

This paper will focus on the use of a specific object as a standard of comparison. The remainder of the diagram and the appendix merely place the material of the paper into perspective. The bottom half of the diagram, therefore, has been included to show that superlatives (the sentences of (2), for example) can and should be treated as a kind of comparison.

- (2) a. This boat is the longest of all.  
 b. This is the longer of the two boats.  
 c. This is the third longest.

In the interests of presenting the overall pattern clearly, two cooccurrence restrictions which are irrelevant to the main topic of this paper have been omitted from the diagram but create blanks in the appendix (sentences 3.211 and 3.221). Because of limitations on space the discussion will consider only adjectives which are inherently comparative and polar opposites (*long, short, big, small, etc.* but not *red, surprised, afraid*).

When one uses a specific object as a standard of reference, one is actually using the specific value of some relevant property possessed by that object.<sup>2</sup> Thus in comparisons of inequality such as:

- (3) a. This boat is longer than that one is wide.  
 b. This boat is longer than that one is.  
 c. This boat is longer than sixteen feet.  
 d. This boat is longer than the width of that one.  
 e. This boat is longer than that one.

<sup>2</sup> Comparison can therefore be thought of as a kind of quantification, though I do not believe that one needs to posit a quantifier constituent in the semantic structure as Hale (1970) and Bresnan (1973) do for their grammatical deep structures.

and in comparisons of equality as:

- (4) a. This boat is as long as that one is wide.  
 b. This boat is as long as that one is.  
 c. This boat must be as long as sixteen feet.  
 d. This boat is as long as the width of that one.  
 e. This boat is as long as that one.

the expression of the standard of reference names a value of a distance and the rest of the sentence states the relation to that distance of the boat being compared.<sup>3</sup> This fact explains several peculiarities of the expression of the standard. First, even when the standard is expressed by a clause (with or without ellipsis) one cannot interpret that clause as a predication. The sentence *this boat is longer than that one is wide* does not imply that *that one is wide*. Similarly, even though the sentence *that boat is six feet wide* is perfectly normal, it cannot be used as the expression of a standard of reference.

\*This boat is longer than that one is six feet wide.

That is to say, the insertion of *six feet* into the clause which expresses the standard of reference forces the interpretation of that clause as a kind of predication, but predications cannot occur in that structure<sup>4</sup>.

The fact that in structures like the ones we are discussing clause structures merely name a value also accounts for the difficulty of using a negative in these clauses. One does not normally find clauses such as:

- \*This boat is longer than that one is not.  
 \*This boat is longer than that one is not wide.

<sup>3</sup> An implication of this analysis is that sentences (3c), (3d), (3e) and (4c), (4d), (4e) do not involve an ellipsis of *is* or *is long*. The expression of the standard is taken to be complete in these cases and the context is explicit enough that there is only one way to interpret the way in which the standard is relevant to the comparison. In other similar comparative structures the relation is not so obvious, however, and the listener has more freedom in interpreting the way in which the standard named is relevant to the comparison. Compare the following sentences:

- That arrow is long enough for a spear.  
 (=It is so long that it could be a spear)  
 That arrow is long enough for us.  
 (=It is long enough to suit our purposes)  
 That jacket is long enough for John.  
 (=It has sufficient length to be appropriate to/for John)

While all three examples involve appropriateness of the compared item to the standard, I find it difficult to account for these forms through the simple deletion of a constant portion of clause structure in a way analogous to the way transformational grammarians account for the forms of (3e) and (4e).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that predications never occur as a standard of reference, but just that they do not occur when the standard of reference is a specific object.

This restriction is only natural if the *than*-clause functions to name a distance, since the negation of a distance is rarely interpreted to be a positive distance. If, however, one thinks up a situation in which the absence of the quality (or quantity) becomes a positive factor, then it is possible to use a negative within the *than*-clause. Thus the sentence *As many people came to John's party as didn't come to Bill's* can be used if both John and Bill invited many people to their parties, but a lot of people came to John's while only a few came to Bill's.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that the expression of the standard merely names a value also explains the fact that in the comparisons of equality one may find expressions such as: *twice as long as that boat is wide* and *half as long as that boat*. If the standard merely names a length, it is only natural occasionally to find that length multiplied by some factor. It would be unusual, however, to find a predication multiplied by some factor.

Further, the fact that the expression of the standard does not predicate can be used to explain the non-occurrence of marked terms in the standard in simple comparisons. While sentences such as (5a) and (5b) are each simple comparisons of two lengths, (6a) and (6b) are not.

- (5) a. The car is longer than the boat is wide.  
 b. The car is as long as the boat is wide.  
 (6) a. The car is longer than the boat is narrow.  
 b. The car is as long as the boat is narrow.

The sentences of (5) involve no reference to a norm and are to be interpreted as:

- (5') a. "The length of the car exceeds the width of the boat".  
 b. "The length of the car equals the width of the boat".

The sentences of (6), on the other hand, both involve an implicit reference to a norm and may be interpreted roughly:

- (6') a. "The degree to which the car exceeds the norm for the length of cars exceeds the degree to which the boat is less than the norm for the width of boats".  
 b. "The degree to which the car exceeds the norm for the length of cars equals the degree to which the boat is less than the norm for the width of boats".

The important point here is the fact that the meanings of the sentences of (6) involve the meanings of the predications *The car is long* and *The boat is narrow* in their interpretations. For this reason these sentences are not typical examples of comparisons involving specific objects as the standard of

<sup>5</sup> Compare this example with the following sentence: *John likes Mary as much as Bill dislikes her*. Here *dislikes* is not simply a denial of *like*, but is to be regarded as an emotion opposite to *like*.

comparison and they therefore require a separate analysis for their interpretation. The analysis proposed by Ross (1974) to account for comparisons of inequality such as:

- (7) Slim was more tipsy than obliterated.

may be of use here. He proposes that sentences of this type be derived from an underlying structure that is roughly:

- (7') "The degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that Slim was tipsy exceeds the degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that he was obliterated". (Ross 1974:269)

The relevance of this analysis to the problem under discussion here is first that the comparison does not apply directly to the two adjectives *tipsy* and *drunk*, but rather to sentences containing them, and second, that *tipsy* and *drunk* belong to clauses which make predications.

If we accept these basic aspects of Ross's analysis, then sentences such as *The car is as long as the boat is narrow* merely fill out the pattern to include comparisons of equality, and the fact that they involve predications (*the car is long* and *the boat is narrow*) far from being an anomaly, is further support for the pattern.<sup>6</sup>

One last bit of evidence seems to indicate that the *than*-clause does not predicate. Sentence (8) has often been quoted as a problem for the transformational analysis of the comparative.

- (8) John thinks he is taller than he is.

The problem arises because the sentence *he is taller than he is* seems to be the grammatical object of the verb *think*, and yet it is self-contradictory while the entire sentence (8) (with *think*) is not. Transformational grammarians then must find some way to take *than he is* out of the object of *think*.

The analysis proposed here, however, avoids that difficulty. If the *than*-clause merely names a distance, then we would no more expect that naming to be affected by the verb *think* than if it were expressed by a noun phrase. Thus the analysis of the sentence *John thinks he is taller than he is* would be very much like the analysis of *John thinks he is taller than six feet*. The semantic functions of the *than* constructions are the same in the two cases. The grammatical means to express this function differs, however. In the one we find a

<sup>6</sup> Accepting this analysis would of course require us to either abandon (6') as semantic structures for (6), or else to derive (6'a) and (6'b) from (6''a) and (6''b).

- (6'') a. "The degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that the car is long exceeds the degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that the boat is wide".  
 b. "The degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that the car is long equals the degree to which it is accurate/true/etc. to say that the boat is wide".

Rather than abandon (6') it seems preferable to say that speakers infer (6') from (6'').

clause with ellipsis, while in the other there is a simple noun phrase of measure.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, let me summarize what has been done here. Systemic grammar presupposes a semantic system had a lexicogrammatical system and a means to map one system on to the other. Because of the relationship between the two, we should expect to find that restrictions on the semantic system should be mirrored by restrictions on the grammatical system, but since the two are independent systems, the effects of the one on the other should not have a simple one for one mapping. We have seen two important examples of the interaction of semantics and grammar. On the one hand the semantic naming function of the expression of the standard of comparison when that standard is a specific object accounts for a wide variety of grammatical peculiarities of the clauses which realize that function. Similarly the restrictions on negation are rather simply stated in semantic terms (merely "one cannot use the absence of something as a standard of comparison"). But this simple statement is only approximately mirrored in the grammar. It is indeed true that negations rarely occur in the expression of the standard of comparison, but those negative forms which express a positive idea (*dislike*, *mistrust*) may occur there.

The semantic system I have presented is quite simple; it involves only a few choices to be made on the part of the speaker, yet it is adequate to account for systems of comparison involving polar terms such as *long* — *short*, *tall* — *short*, *big* — *little*, *old* — *young*, etc. and it can be expanded to include other adjectives, and also adverbs of degree (*very long*, *almost as long*, *far too long*, etc.). The simplicity derives from the fact that no attempt has been made to force the semantic structure into the shape of a tree. In this way it is pos-

<sup>7</sup> A last indication (I cannot really call it evidence) of my contention derives from the treatment of forms like *yet*, *any*, *ever*, *either*, in Quirk et al (1972). Because those forms typically occur in negative sentences (*He hasn't any butter. They don't ever come*) and in questions (*Does he have any butter? Did they ever come?*) and in conditional sentences (*If he has any butter. If he even comes*). Quirk and his associates call these non-assertive forms. This choice of terms is relevant since these words often occur in the expression of the standard of comparison.

- (9) a. This boat is longer than *any* I have ever seen.  
 b. This boat is longer than any I have seen *yet*.  
 c. This is longer than *either* of those boats.

Since naming does not predicate, much less assert, the description given by Quirk et al would predict that these forms could occur in the expression of the standard of comparison even though Quirk and his colleagues did not consider this environment when they chose their terms.

I consider this argument weak since I may be using their analysis in a way it was never intended. The fit between their terminology and my argument, however, is too neat to go unmentioned.

sible to treat *this boat is long* as a comparison in exactly the same framework as more overt and explicit comparisons were treated.<sup>8</sup>

## APPENDIX

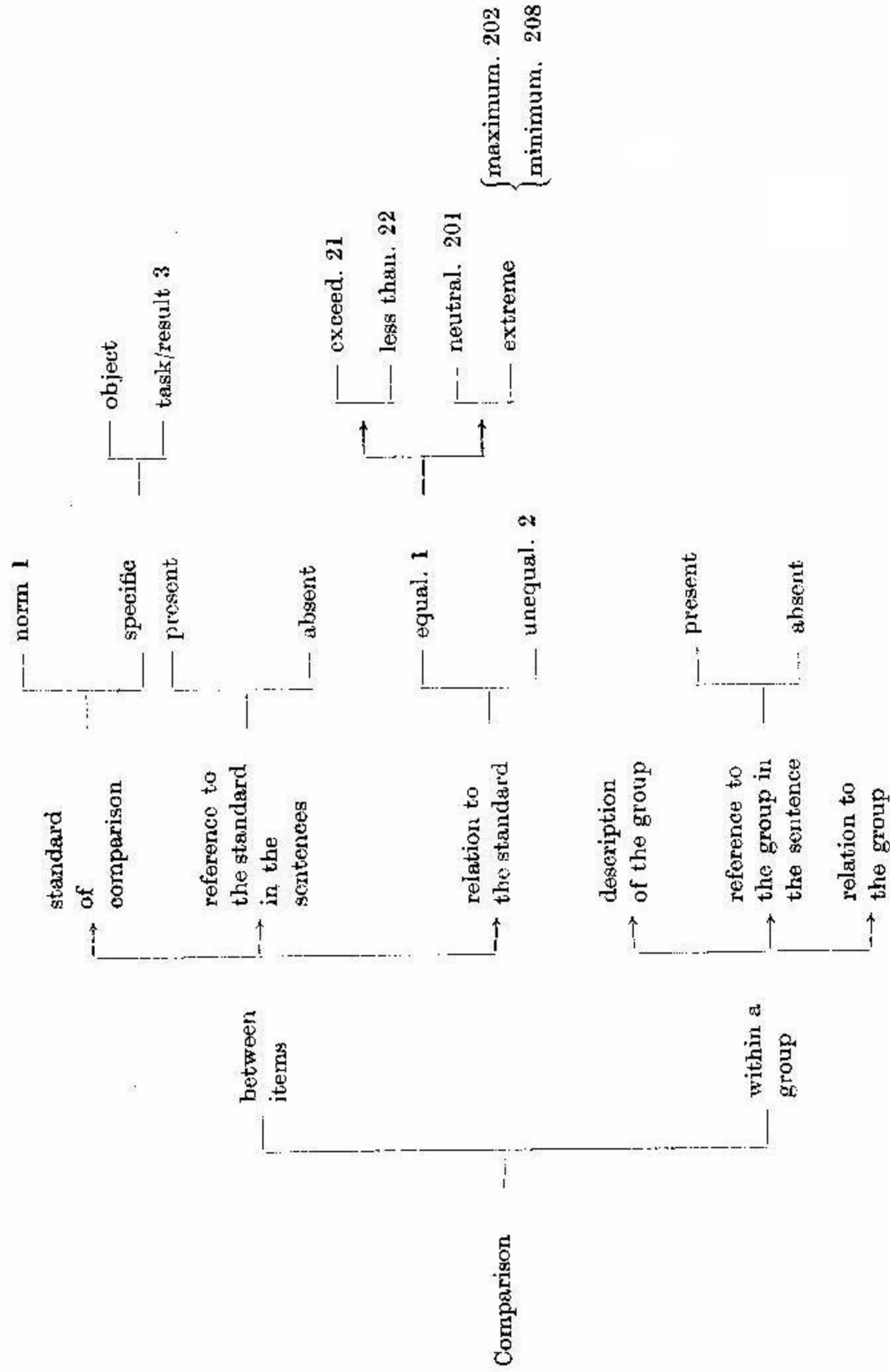
- 1.1 This is as long as a boat.  
 1.211 This is long for a boat.  
 1.212 This is too long for a boat.  
 1.213 This is long enough for a boat.  
 1.221 This is short for a boat.  
 1.222 This is short enough for a boat.  
 1.223 This is too short for a boat.  
 2.1 This is as long as that boat.  
     This is as long as that boat is.  
     This is as long as that boat is wide.  
 2.211 This is longer than that boat.  
     This is longer than that boat is.  
     This is longer than that boat is wide.  
 2.212 That is too long for the Queen Mary.  
     a. (=that unidentified ship cannot be the Queen Mary because the Queen Mary is not that long)  
     b. (=that anchor chain is too long to be appropriate for the Queen Mary)  
 2.213 That is long enough for the Queen Mary.  
 2.221 This is shorter than that boat.  
 2.222 That is short enough for the Queen Mary.  
 2.223 That is too short for the Queen Mary.  
 3.1 That is so  $\begin{matrix} \diagup \text{long} \diagdown \\ \diagdown \text{short} \diagup \end{matrix}$  that it won't fit.  
 3.211 \_\_\_\_\_  
 3.212 That is too long to fit.  
 3.213 That is long enough to fit.  
 3.221 \_\_\_\_\_  
 3.222 That is short enough to fit.  
 3.223 That is too short to fit.

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Diagram 1



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