

Relative features and lower complementisers in West-Germanic comparatives

My talk investigates the different distribution of the complementisers *that/dass/dat* in comparative constructions in English, German, and Dutch, arguing that it is primarily tied to the differences in the relative feature that may or may not be present on these elements.

The occurrence of *dat* in Dutch comparatives is shown in (1):

- (1) a. *Emma is even oud als dat Peter is.* ‘Emma is as old as Peter.’
b. *Emma is ouder dan dat Peter is.* ‘Emma is older than Peter.’

The constructions in (1) are regular degree comparatives: (1a) expresses equality and (1b) expresses inequality. Such patterns are not attested either in English or in German. German allows *als dass* in cases like (2):

- (2) a. *Sie geht lieber ins Kino als dass sie zu Hause studiert.*
‘She rather goes to the cinema than studies at home.’
b. *Es ist zu schön, als dass es wahr sein könnte.*
‘It is too nice to be true.’

As seen in (2a), German *als dass* is not tied to a proper degree construction: here the subclause is taken by the adverbial *lieber* and there is no gradable adjective (unlike *oud* in (1) above). Likewise, (2b) does not contain the regular comparative marker *-er*, which normally takes *als*-clauses.

The differences can be attributed to the featural requirements on lower complementisers in constructions like (1), if any. Degree comparatives regularly contain a double CP for semantic reasons, whereby the lower CP hosts the comparative operator that moves up there via ordinary relative operator movement: this CP is marked as [rel] and it may therefore host certain relative complementisers (Bacskai-Atkari 2016). The German complementiser *dass*, which does not appear in ordinary relative clauses (not to be confused with the relative pronoun *das*), is [–rel] and hence incompatible with this: it types clauses that are complete propositions, which do not contain a gap necessary for a relative clause. This condition is met in (2), which I will show to lack comparative operator movement, as opposed to (1). Dutch *dat* is underspecified for [±rel]: unlike in English, *dat* is not a regular relative complementiser in Dutch but it is attested as a complementiser alongside relative operators in various dialects (Bennis & Haegeman 1986) and it can marginally even occur on its own in a few dialects (Boef 2013). By contrast, English has no underspecified *that*: there are two lexical items, a [–rel] declarative and, as in (3), a [+rel] relative complementiser:

- (3) *I know the man that lives next door.*

I argue that the inherent [+rel] specification of *that* types the clause as relative proper and does not allow a higher clause-typing projection (e.g. comparative) but requires immediate association with the lexical head in the matrix clause. This is also tied to *that* being a demonstrative-based relative complementiser rather than an interrogative-based one, which are also underspecified for [±rel] and may appear as lower complementisers (as in certain Slavic languages, Bacskai-Atkari 2016). The syntactic differences concerning the availability of a lower complementiser in West Germanic are hence due to a minimal lexical difference on the complementiser in question and they are in line with the more general distribution of *that/dass/dat* in the respective languages.

References. Bacskai-Atkari, J. 2016. Towards a cross-linguistic typology of marking polarity in embedded degree clauses. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*. • Bennis, H. & L. Haegeman. 1984. On the status of agreement and relative clauses in West-Flemish. In *Sentential complementation*. • Boef, E. 2013. *Doubling in relative clauses: Aspects of morphosyntactic microvariation in Dutch*. • Chomsky, N. 1977. On WH-movement. In *Formal syntax*.