



Reflections on the grammatical category of the *than* element in English comparative constructions: A corpus-based systemic functional approach



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Nominative pronouns do not tend to end a comparative construction.
- The accusative forms of personal pronouns following *than* are the stressed personal pronouns.
- In comparative constructions *than* is a paratactic conjunction.

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that in comparative constructions, when the clausal element compared is the subject of the matrix clause, the personal pronoun following *than* can be either nominative which is usually used in formal English, where *than* is considered as a conjunction, or accusative which is usually used in informal English, where *than* is considered as a preposition. However, the data collected from the COCA corpus indicate that nominative pronouns do not tend to end a comparative construction in either formal or informal English. Based on the fundamentals of Systemic Functional Linguistics, it is improper to consider the accusative form of personal pronouns in comparative constructions as the object of *than*; rather they are the stressed personal pronouns. It is concluded that in comparative constructions *than* is always a conjunction, and the personal pronoun following *than* can be expanded into a finite clause. However, if the nominal group following *than* has no comparee in the matrix clause, it is not a comparative clause and the *than*-phrase is a prepositional phrase. It is further concluded that in comparative constructions *than* is best considered as a paratactic conjunction because comparative constructions cannot be transpositioned with the primary clauses in clause complexes.

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1. Introduction

With the development of the syntactic theories, the study of the English comparative constructions is becoming deeper and more systematic (e.g. Pilch, 1965; Doherty and Schwartz, 1967; Bresnan, 1973; Heim, 1985, 2000; Izvorski, 1995; Kennedy, 2000, 2002, 2007; Kennedy and Merchant, 2000; Matushansky, 2002, 2011; Bhatt and Pancheva, 2004; Bhatt and Takahashi, 2011; Lechner, 2004). However, these studies are within the framework of generative linguistics, focusing mainly on the movement or the deletion of the verb phrases or the noun phrases in comparative

constructions but leaving the case of the personal pronoun following the *than* element and its grammatical category untouched. They take for granted the opinion of traditional grammarians such as Quirk et al. (1972, 1985), Thomson and Martinet (1986), Alexander (1988) and Wilson (1993), etc. that the *than* element in comparative constructions can be either a conjunction or a preposition, and the case of the personal pronouns following *than* can be either nominative or accusative. Here is an example given by Quirk et al. (1985, p. 886):

- (1) a. He always wakes up earlier *than* I.
- b. He always wakes up earlier *than* me.

There is only one clausal element to be compared to in the matrix clause in each of the two sentences in (1). In (1a), *than* is a

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conjunction, and the nominative *I* is a reduced clause, and in (1b), *than* is a preposition, hence the accusative *me* is used. If there are two arguments in the matrix clause, the remaining personal pronoun following *than* should be nominative when it is compared with the subject or accusative when it is compared with the object of the matrix clause. For example:

- (2) a. But in a downturn, you love it *more than they*.
b. Is he gonna like her *more than me*?

However, if the comparative clause is reduced to a noun phrase, “ambiguity can arise as to whether a remaining noun phrase is subject or object” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1132). For example:

- (3) Jack loves the dog more than *his wife*.

Traditional grammarians such as Coe (1980, p. 61), Quirk et al. (1985, p. 1132) and Thomson and Martinet et al. (1986, p. 26) believe that when the same verb is required before and after *than*, an auxiliary verb can be used for the second occurrence and if there is no change of tense, in very formal English the auxiliary can be dropped. In informal English, however, accusatives are more usual, and “*than* counts as preposition” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 337). Thus, if *his wife* in (3) is replaced by a personal pronoun, formal English makes the distinction on whether it is the subject or the object. However, a new ambiguity will occur here. Without relevant background information, it is hard to determine whether the accusative pronoun is compared with the object in the matrix clause in formal English or it is compared with the subject in informal English. Therefore, “this use of objective case is considered to be grammatically incorrect” (Ansell, 2000, p. 327).

The purpose of this paper is to conduct corpus-based quantitative research of comparative constructions. For this purpose, this research intends to answer the following two questions: (1) What is the principle of genre distribution of the case of personal pronouns following *than* in comparative constructions? (2) What is the grammatical category of *than*? To answer the two questions, Section 2 explains how the corpus is selected and the data collected. Section 3 analyzes the genre distribution of the data collected from the corpus. The case of the personal pronouns in comparative constructions and the grammatical category of *than* are examined in Section 4.

2. Methodology

2.1. Corpus

In this research we will use the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). We choose COCA because it is of a relatively large size (464 million words). This allows collecting enough data for constructions of relatively low occurring frequencies. The corpus is available online (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca>). We can write relevant search queries to help retrieve and count up the occurrences of comparative constructions. COCA is nearly evenly divided (20% in each genre) between the five genres: Spoken texts, Fiction texts, Magazine texts, Newspaper texts, and Academic texts. This is helpful for analyzing the distributions of different types of comparative constructions in different genres. See Table 1:

Table 1
Genre distribution of numbers of words in COCA.

Genre	Spoken	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Academic	Total
Num. of words	95,385,672	90,344,134	95,564,706	91,680,966	91,044,778	464,020,256

2.2. Data processing

To answer the two research questions, it is not necessary to retrieve all the comparative constructions in the corpus. We retrieve only the collocations consisting of the *than* element and a nominative or accusative first or third personal pronoun or a nominative pronoun plus an auxiliary verb directly ending a sentence. See Table 2:

The second personal pronoun *you* is not included because it does not show case. It should be noted that not all the nominative pronouns in the *than* + nominative + auxiliary constructions are the standard of comparison. See example (4):

- (4) I think I feel so much better *than I did*. (COCA_SPOK)

The auxiliary verb *did* cannot be omitted because it encodes past tense. The clausal element being compared is the tense of the verb *feel* rather than the nominative pronoun *I*. So the *than* + nominative + auxiliary constructions can be categorized into three groups according to the comparee in the matrix clause: the subject, the auxiliary verb and the subject plus auxiliary. As for the *than* + nominative constructions directly ending a sentence, no matter how many arguments there are in the matrix clause, the nominative pronoun is always the subject of the reduced comparative clause. As for the *than* + accusative constructions, if there is only one possible comparee, that is, the subject in the matrix clause, the accusative pronoun is compared with the subject, and if there are two, it may be compared with either the subject or the object of the matrix clause.

We then classify the three types of comparative constructions collected from COCA according to the Spoken, Fiction, Magazine, Newspaper and Academic genres into 15 groups. Finally, we will use the UAM CorpusTool 2.8.12 which is a set of tools developed for the linguistic annotation of text to create a system, incorporate and annotate the data according to the system. See Fig. 1:

3. Results

3.1. Types of comparative constructions

The matrix clause of a *than* + nominative construction may have one or two arguments, that is, it may have a subject and an object or not. No matter whether there is an object in the matrix clause or not, the comparee of the nominative pronoun in a *than* + nominative construction is always the subject, hence, no ambiguity occurs. Take the total number of *than* + nominative constructions in COCA for instance, those with an auxiliary verb accounting for 91%, and those with no auxiliary verb, 9%. The two form a skewed system, the former being unmarked, and the latter, marked.

It can also be seen in Fig. 1 that in comparative constructions, there are far more nominative pronouns with an auxiliary verb than accusative pronouns, the probability being 0.75:0.25, and there are also many more accusative pronouns than nominative pronouns with no auxiliary verb, the probability being 0.77: 0.23. In the following, we will count the accusative personal pronouns in comparative constructions with one and two arguments in the matrix clauses in COCA. See Table 3:

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