

Comparative correlatives and akin constructions in Portuguese

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Introduction: The semantics of syntactic constructions as (1), named by McCawley (1988) as ‘comparative conditionals’ and also named ‘comparative correlatives’, has been deeply influenced by the foundational work of Beck (1997) and extended to the analysis of equivalent constructions in other languages (see, e.g., Lin 2007).

(1) The slimmer an attorney looks, the more successful he is.

Since Beck (1997), it has been undisputed that the semantics of these constructions incorporates the meaning of regular conditionals and the one of comparative clauses. Roughly, Beck’s analysis proposes that the meaning of (1) corresponds to (2):

(2) $\forall x,y [\text{attorney}(x) \wedge \text{attorney}(y) \wedge x \text{ looks slimmer than } y] \Rightarrow [x \text{ is more successful than } y]$

This analysis captures the fact that correlative constructions express the information that a raising movement in a scale implies a movement in another scale (i.e., they express the information that the two scales are related).

In Portuguese, the construction equivalent to (1) is (3), and there is another syntactic construction, exemplified in (4), which also expresses correlation of two scales (the scale of time and the scale of temperature, in (4):

(3) Quanto mais elegante for um advogado mais sucesso tem
how-much more slim be an attorney more success has

(4) Cada ano pagamos mais impostos
each year pay more taxes
‘Every year we pay more taxes.’

Curiously, the translation to Chinese Mandarin of these two Portuguese constructions is the same, both corresponding to the construction ‘yuè... yuè...’, and an analysis along the lines proposed by Beck (1997) also captures the meaning of (4). However, the assumption that, both in (3) as in (4), *mais* (‘more’) is the same comparative operator that occurs in comparative clauses is questionable on the basis of several pieces of evidence. The purpose of this communication is to present these pieces of evidence, synthesized below, and to suggest a different analysis of the semantics of correlative constructions (both the ones exemplified by (3) as those exemplified by (4)).

Problems: The assumption that in (3) and (4) *mais* (‘more’) expresses comparison of degrees, as in regular comparatives, faces the following problems:

(i) *than*-clauses are in principle ruled out from comparative correlatives, as shown in (5), but are obligatory in (6), where *mais* (‘more’) does not precede a time-word:

(5) *os verões estão cada vez mais quentes do que estavam antigamente
the summers are each time more hot than what were before
‘Summers are getting hotter and hotter than before.’

(6) Cada livro que publicava tinha mais sucesso *(do que o anterior)
each book that published had more success than what the previous
‘Each book (s)he published had more success than the previous one.’

(ii) In addition to the invariable pronoun *quanto* that occurs in (3), there is also the pronoun *quantos/quantas*, that agrees in number and gender with the name. The plural form is obligatory when

the verb of the clause inflects in the 1st or 2nd person, but both the variable and the invariable pronoun may occur with the 3rd person:

- (7) a. Quantos/*quanto mais (nós) formos/ (vocês) forem, melhor
how-many/how-much more (we) are / (you) are better
 ‘The more we / you are, the better.’
 b. Quantos/quanto mais (eles) forem, melhor
how-many/how-much more (they) are better
 ‘The more they are, the better.’

(iii) In (8), the invariable and the variable forms of the pronoun lead to different inferences. (8a) conveys the information that they are already entitled to receive subsidy, (8b) does not:

- (8) [They had (recently) their first sun]
 a. Quanto mais filhos tiverem mais subsídios podem receber.
how-much more suns have more subsidies may receive
 b. Quantos mais filhos tiverem mais subsídios podem receber.
how-many more suns have more subsidies may receive
 ‘The more suns they have, the more subsidies they are entitled to.’

(iv) With the operator *menos* (‘less’), the variable form of the pronoun is excluded, only the invariable one being allowed:

- (9) Quanto/*quantos menos pessoas souberem, melhor
*how-much/*how-many less persons know better*
 ‘The fewer people who know, the better.’

(v) In (regular) comparatives, all the equivalents of *more/-er*, *less* and *as* may occur, but in comparative correlatives equatives are ruled out. However, if *more/less* in these constructions are the same words that occur in comparatives, (10) should be fine, expressing the information that the two relevant scales are not related:

- (10) *Quanto mais madura estiver a maçã tão saberosa é
 **how-much more mature the apple is as tasty is*

Sketched proposal: The basics of the proposal is that *mais* (‘more’) and *menos* (‘less’) in comparative correlatives are not comparative operators that express ordering of degrees/quantities ($[g > g']$), but operators that indicate, respectively, addition and subtraction. This allows a simple compositional analysis of the meaning of (4) (for each year, add an amount of taxes) and explains (i) straightforwardly (adding an amount implies adding it to what exists, and time words refer to objects intrinsically ordered, objects as books do not). Concerning the constructions with *quanto(s)* (‘how-much/how-many’), the observations in (ii)-(iv) are also explainable. The plural form refers to quantities superior to 1; the invariable form does not restrict quantities, allowing the inclusion of 0, 1 or more than 1. By contrast, as far as I can see, none of the facts indicated in (i)-(v) would be explainable under the assumption that *mais* (‘more’) and *menos* (‘less’) express comparison of degrees.

References:

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