Measure phrases and cross-polar (a)nomalies

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Clausal comparatives are usually elliptical (1a). However, under certain conditions, they may contain two adjectives (1b-d):

(1)  a. John is taller than Mary is ___.
    b. The desk is longer than the table is wide.
    c. If Esme chooses to marry funny but poor Ben over rich but boring Steve, then there can be only one explanation. Ben must be funnier than Steve is rich.
    d. San Francisco Bay is more shallow than Monterey Bay is deep.

In this talk, partly based on work in collaboration with Camelia Constantinescu and Kateřina Součková, I will focus on restrictions on cases such as the one in (1b), as discussed by (Bierwisch 1989, Büring 2007, Doetjes et al. 2011, Kennedy 2001), which I will call cases of absolute comparison. (1b) involves a comparison in absolute terms between the length of the desk and the width of the table. In this respect it differs from (1c) (relative or indirect comparison, Bale 2006, 2008) and from (1d) (comparison of deviation, Kennedy 2001).

An important particularity of absolute comparison is that not just any two adjectives may be compared. This issue has been investigated in much detail by Kennedy (2001), who claims that the polarity of the adjective in the main clause has to match the polarity of the adjective in the than-clause. Combinations of positive and negative adjectives are excluded, resulting in what he calls cross-polar anomalies.

However, the data turns out to be more complicated in two respects. In the first place, there also exist cross-polar nomalies (2) (the term comes from Büring 2007; the phenomenon is also discussed by Bierwisch 1989). In the second place, comparatives with two negative adjectives are not that good (Bierwisch 1989).

(2) Unfortunately, the ladder was shorter than the house was high.

Büring’s analysis of cross-polar nomalies is based on the idea that negative adjectives are interpreted as little+$A^\circ$. Thus, the comparative morpheme –er applies to little, which is a meaning component of the negative adjective short ($LITTLE:+long$). As a result, shorter corresponds to less long and thus the two adjectives are of the same polarity after all.

In this talk, I will explore an alternative to this analysis, which is based on the vague predicate analysis of the comparative and which involves measure phrases (cf. Doetjes 2009, Doetjes et al. 2011, Klein 1980, 1982). The analysis of these cases will thus have consequences for the possible readings of measure phrases. More in particular, I will follow Spector (2013), who argues that at least-readings of measure phrases exist (contra Breheny 2008). On the other hand, I will argue that we have to assume that under particular conditions, measure phrases can also have an at most-reading (contra Spector), turning back to the idea of scale reversal of Horn (1972). This makes it possible to analyze (2) in terms of scale reversal rather than in terms of the interpretation of the negative adjective as little+$A^\circ$.

References