A conjunctional analysis of Chinese multiple-condition comparatives

key words: multiple-condition comparatives, phrasal/clausal comparatives, Mandarin Chinese

This paper argues against the recent phrasal-comparative-only proposal in the literature of bi-comparatives in Mandarin Chinese, as in, for example, Lin, (2009), who argues that multiple-condition comparatives in Mandarin should consist of multiple DegP-shells (multiple phrases) and Chinese do not have clausal comparatives. Lin, (2009) calls different pairs of conditions in Mandarin comparatives multiple-topics, for example, in (1a) Zhangsan and Lisi are the first pair of topics, and zai chuang-shang ‘at bed-up’ and zai zhuozi-shang ‘at desk-up’ are the second pair of topics, and comparative morpheme bi is to help do comparison between parallel topics (examples are on the second page, the same below). According to the phrasal-comparative-only analysis, Chinese do not have clausal comparatives, e.g. (1a) has a structure as in (1b), where all content before (i.e. Zhangsan zai Chuang-shang ‘Zhangsan at bed-up’) or after the comparative morpheme bi (i.e. Lisi zai zhuozi-shang ‘Lisi at desk-up’) cannot form constituents respectively. A major problem of this analysis is overgeneralization and according to this analysis, any fulfillment of two semantically parallel conditions will generate a grammatical comparative sentence. However, parallel conditions may not always be accommodated by bi-comparatives, for example, a pair of different temporal phrases fulfill the requirement of this analysis (i.e. jinnian ‘this year’ vs. qunian ‘last year’ as in (2)) but may not lead to a grammatical sentence as illustrated in (2). Moreover, a topic can be realized as Patient at the sentence-initial or sub-topic position in Mandarin as in (3a), but two parallel Patient topics cannot necessarily form a grammatical bi-comparative as in (3b).

In this paper I propose a new analysis, I argue that Chinese does have clausal comparatives and has such similar distinction between phrasal vs. clausal comparatives as is found in comparatives in English as well as other languages (Handamer, 1973; Heim, 1985; Pancheva, 2006; among many others). I argue that in Mandarin multiple-condition comparatives, bi is a conjunction rather than a DegP head, connecting two separate DegP-shells realized as two clauses, each of which has to be syntactically licensed within its clause boundary, unlike phrasal comparatives in which bi is head of the DegP. Not only can this analysis capture the difference between phrasal comparatives and clausal comparatives in Mandarin, but it can also avoid aforementioned overgeneralization, unlike the phrasal-comparative-only analysis. Furthermore, because of the difference between phrasal and clausal comparatives, the position of bi can be taken up by the raising adjective gao ‘tall’ in transitive comparatives as in (4a) (following Grano & Kennedy, 2010), but this can never happen in multiple-condition comparison like (4b). The proposed analysis of the bi-comparative is supported by examining conjunctural patterns such as those consisting of canonical conjunctions gen ‘together with’ as well as he ‘and’, the structure of which well parallel with the bi-comparative, as illustrated in (5), cf. (1a) and (5). Other evidence examined in this paper from positioning of negation and adverbs, topic deletion and passivisation, etc, also supports the conjunctional analysis of bi in multiple-condition comparatives and further supports the distinction between clausal vs. phrasal comparatives in Mandarin.
(1) a. Zhangsan zai chuang-shang bi Lisi zai zhuozi-shang tiao-de gao.
   ‘Zhangsan jump higher on the bed than Lisi jump on the desk.’
   b. Zhangsan [\text{VP at bed-up [\text{DegP bi Lisi [\text{DegP e at desk-up [\text{VP jump-PART tall}]}}]]}

(2) *Zhe-gen shengzi \text{jinnian} bi na-gen shengzi \text{qunian} chang (liang-cun).
   Intended reading: ‘this rope used this year is longer (by two feet) than that one used last year.’

(3) a. Zhangsan ji bu xihuan chi, yu xihuan chi.
   ‘Chicken, Zhangsan does not like to eat, fish likes to eat.’
   b. *Zhangsan yu bi ji xihuan chi.
   Intended reading: ‘Zhangsan likes to eat fish more than chicken.’

(4) a. Zhangsan gao Lisi liang-cun.
   ‘Zhangsan is two feet taller than Lisi.’
   b. *Zhangsan jinnian gao Lisi qunian liang-cun
   Zhangsan this.year tall Lisi last.year two-feet

(5) Zhangsan zai chuang-shang gen/he Lisi zai zhuozi-shang tiao yiyang gao.
   ‘Zhangsan jump the same height on the bed with Lisi on the desk.’

\textbf{Selected bibliography:}