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PAPERS OF THE
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Meskwaki Comparatives: A First Look

AMY DAHLSTROM
University of Chicago

The syntax of comparative constructions is a topic which has not so far received much attention in Algonquian linguistics.¹ The present paper is thus a first look at how comparatives work in Meskwaki, and how the Meskwaki construction fits into crosslinguistic typological studies of comparatives. Particular attention will be paid to the morphosyntax of the Algonquian phenomenon of RELATIVE ROOTS and how the relative roots function in comparatives. It will be seen that the relative root strategy permits expression of the standard of comparison in a typologically unusual way.

TYPOLOGY OF COMPARATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Before turning to Meskwaki we must establish some terminology for referring to pieces of a comparative construction. Following Kennedy et al. (2011), I will use DIMENSION for the gradable predicate of the comparative, TARGET for the subject of the gradable predicate (John in (1)), and STANDARD for the other individual to which the target is being compared:

(1) John is taller than Bill.

\[
\text{target dimension standard} \quad (\text{Kennedy et al. 2011})
\]

Stassen (1985) investigates comparative constructions in a number of languages, finding a range of structural possibilities for expressing comparison. A few of his types are listed under (2): note that the three

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types listed crucially differ in how the standard of comparison is expressed.

(2) Stassen (1985): variety of comparatives cross-linguistically, including:

- “particle” type: e.g., English, using particle than to introduce standard
- “exceed” type: [John exceeds Bill in tallness; John is tall exceed Bill]
- conjoined type: [John is tall, Bill is short]

English displays a “particle” type of comparative: that is, a specific particle, than, is used to introduce the standard in a comparative expression. A second strategy is labeled the “exceed” type of comparative, frequently encountered in Africa and Southeast Asia, among other parts of the world. In the “exceed” type, the standard is realized as the direct object of a verb meaning ‘exceed’ or ‘surpass.’ The “exceed” verb may appear as the main verb of the sentence with the dimension expressed as a nominalization (something like “John exceeds Bill in tallness”) or the “exceed” verb may follow the dimensional predicate, creating a serial verb construction (something like “John is tall exceed Bill”). A third type identified by Stassen is the conjoined comparative. In this type, two separate clauses are employed, the first asserting the value of the target on the dimension in question, the second doing the same for the standard.

In the extensive survey done by Stassen (1985), there is only one Algonquian language considered: Menominee, listed as a member of the conjoined comparative type. Stassen’s example (1985:186, taken from Bloomfield 1962) is reproduced in (3):²

(3) Aapeqsek tatathkesew, nenah taeh kan

more he.is.strong I and not

‘He is stronger than me.’

The first clause of (3) asserts only ‘he is stronger,’ with no mention of the standard. The second clause (or, here, clause fragment) provides information about the standard of comparison: ‘and I am not.’

³Richard Rhodes (personal communication) suggests that the Nishnaabemwin construction may be a calque on English, due to language contact.

4. Textual sources: 1880: text in Dahlstrom 2003; Auto: Goddard 2006; mehk: text in Dahlstrom, to appear; Owl: Goddard 2007; W: Kiyama 1913. Abbreviations: 0 = inan (in verb agreement); 1p = first-person plural exclusive; 3r = obliative; ANIM = animate; AOR = aorist (prefix or verb paradigm); DIM = diminutive; DUB = dubitative; EMPH = emphatic particle; IC = initial change (ablaut process); IND = independent indicative; OBL = oblique; PART = participle; PL = plural; POT = potential; REDUP = reduplication; SG = singular; VOC = vocative. An en dash “—” is used to separate a preverb and a verb; hyphens mark morpheme boundaries. “>” separates subject and object features. Verbs in relative clauses are inflected in the participle paradigm, and bear an additional suffix agreeing with the head of the relative clause, indicated after a slash.

In Valentine’s grammar of Nishnaabemwin (Valentine 2001:904ff), on the other hand, he presents a comparative construction that belongs to the particle type, similar to English.³ A sequence of particles, pii dash, introduces the standard of comparison:

(4) Washke ndoo-gnooz pii dash mBill

more I.am.tall than then Bill

‘I am taller than Bill.’

In a preliminary survey of comparative expressions found in Meskwaki texts, it seems clear that in general Meskwaki comparatives are more similar to Menominee than to Nishnaabemwin. In other words, Meskwaki appears to exhibit the conjoined type of comparative, rather than the particle type. In (5), for example, the first clause states that “the boy was older” (the mechanism for expressing extent is explained in the following section). The second clause of (5) states “the girl [was] less [old],” with the verbal elided. The standard of comparison in (5) is ‘the girl,’ which does not appear in the same clause as the target of comparison, ‘the boy.’

(5) a’wasi me’hi e’h-alpi hëčikí kuwi yesc’ha, iškwes’cha atene wi.

a’wasi me’hi e’h-alpi hëčikí kuwi yesc’ha, iškwes’cha atene wi.

more.DIM AOR-be-old.to.such.extent-3/AOR boy-SG girl-SG less

‘... the boy being a little older, and the girl younger.’ (Owl S88)
Before turning to further examples I must point out that in many instances the standard of comparison is not made explicit at all. Rather, it is simply clear from the context who the target is being compared to. This phenomenon is of course not peculiar to Meskwaki: it is frequently seen in English as well. Kennedy (2007), following Sapir (1944), uses the term “implicit comparative” for this type of comparative.

(6) is a Meskwaki example of an implicit comparative where the context makes it clear who the standard is:

(6) e’hasipimeko-neškinawwači îhkwewaki
   e’ha-asipi—meko —neškinaw-a’wači îhkwewa’aki
   AGR-all.together—=EMPH —hate-3P=3/AOR woman-PL.

a’wasimko e’hpíha’pi he’i-wesenísîlki.
a’wasí=meko Ic-áhpíh-áhpí he’i-wesenísîlki.
more=EMPH IC-REDUP-to.such.extent—be.pretty-3P/PART/3P
‘but she (obv.) was hated by all of the women (prox.)
who were prettier [than she was].’ (mehk.30GH)

The plural proximate NP ‘the women’ is modified by a relative clause ‘who were prettier’—that is, prettier than the other woman who is the object of their dislike.

Let us now look more closely at the morphology and syntax of the Meskwaki comparatives. (7) lists three verb forms: first, just a plain verb asserting that someone is pretty. This is called the positive form of a predicate in typological studies, and does not involve comparison.

(7) a. [we’wesenisi-wa] ‘she is pretty’ POSITIVE FORM

b. a’wasí . . . [a’hpí-he’i—we’wesenisi-wa] ‘she is prettier’ COMPARATIVE
   more to.such.extent—
   OBLIQUE

c. [ma’wači—we’wesenisi-wa] ‘she is the prettiest’ SUPERLATIVE
   of.all—

The second form in (7) is the one we are particularly interested in, the comparative. There is a particle a’wasí ‘more’ preceding the verb, and the verb (typically) contains an extra morpheme, such as the preverb ahpi-he’i—

to such an extent.’ As we will see below, ahpi-he’i— belongs to the set of morphemes known as relative roots, associated with oblique arguments. In the template in (7), therefore, I have annotated a’wasi ‘more’ as being an oblique argument of the verb.5

For the sake of completeness, I have also listed the superlative form of the predicate ‘be pretty’ in the templates given in (7). Notice that the superlative form has a different preverb, ma’wači— ‘of all,’ and no particle outside the verb complex. The syntax of the superlative is consequently quite different from that of the comparative, lacking both a relative root morpheme and an external oblique argument. An example of the superlative form is given in (8). This is taken from the same text as (6), describing the son of the woman who was hated.

(8) e’hna’wačimeko-wesenisiči i’na’etasiwači aPenohahi.
   e’h-ma’wači—meko —we’wesenisiči i’na
   AOR-of-all—=EMPH —be.pretty-3/AOR that.ANIM

Ic ta’si-wači aPenohahi.
Ic-be.so.many-3P/OBL child-OBV,PL
‘and that [little boy] was the prettiest of all the children.’ (mehk.31K)

RELATIVE ROOTS

At this point some general background on the Algonquian phenomenon of relative roots may be useful, since certain relative roots are associated with comparative constructions. Relative roots are morphemes which appear either at the beginning of a simple verb stem or (usually) as a preverb to the left of a verb stem. Relative roots license oblique arguments in the syntax, with each relative root being associated with a particular semantic role. The typical position for obliques in Meskwaki is immediately to the left of the verbal complex.

(9) lists a few of the most common relative roots and their semantic roles. For example, the initial form tan- or preverb taši— is used to license

5. It should be noted that Algonquian languages do not exhibit a syntactic category of adjective, so there is nothing directly comparable to the English strategy of adding the suffix -er to an adjective stem.
obliques expressing stationary location. in- or preverb isiki- is used to express the goal of motion; there is also a homophonous relative root in- or isiki- that licenses manner obliques. The initial ot- or preverb oči– licenses source arguments with motion verbs, and is also metaphorically extended to express the cause or reason for an event taking place.

(9) Stem-initial form Preverb Semantic type of oblique argument
   a. tan- taši– stationary location
   b. in- isiki– goal of motion
   c. in- isiki– manner
   d. ot- oči– source (of motion); cause or reason

(10) and (11) illustrate the function of relative roots, using the source relative root ot–oči–.

(10) meneseki e hočiwenekoci,  
menes-ekí e h-očiwen-koči,  
island-LOC AOR-carry.O.from.(there)-3’>3/AOR
OBIQUE 'It (an eagle) carried him from the island.' (M15B)

In (10) the relative root appears in stem-initial position, combining with a bound verb-final morpheme -iwen- meaning 'carry.' The resulting verb stem is a three-place verb, requiring a subject, object, and oblique expressing source. The requirement for an oblique is satisfied by the noun meneseki 'island,' inflected for locative case, which appears immediately to the left of the verb.

The syntax of (11) is similar to that of (10), but in (11) the relative root combines with a full verb stem, rather than with a morpheme smaller than a full stem. The relative root in (11) therefore is realized as a preverb oči–, a separate phonological word, compounded with the verb stem. The entire compound is inflected with the prefix-suffix combination expressing the subject of the verb, and the oblique argument expressing the source of motion appears outside the verbal complex, immediately to the left.

(11) i tepi neteči–nowi pena  
i-tepi ne-oči–nowi–pena  
there l-from-go.out-(1)P/IND
OBIQUE 'we (exclusive) went out from there'

RELATIVE ROOTS IN COMPARATIVES

With the above background on relative roots, let us now return to comparatives and ask which relative roots are employed to express comparison. The most frequently used relative root is initial ahpi’-ht-, preverb ahpi’-hči ‘to such an extent,’ already seen in (5) and (6) above. (12) is another example with ahpi’-hči, here added to the verb for ‘rain.’

(12) e śkamimeko e hanemi-ahpi’-hči-kemiya-niki,  
eskami=meko e-h-anemi-ahpi’-hči-kemiya-niki  
increasingly=EMPH AOR-go.on.to.such.extent-rain-0/AOR
‘It began to rain harder and harder.’ (mekh.8L)

The oblique associated with ahpi’-hči in (12) is e škamí ‘increasingly,’ producing the gloss ‘it rained harder and harder.’ (12) is another instance of an implicit comparative, comparing the current intensity of rain to a previous light rain. Additional examples with the relative root ahpi’-ht-/ahpi’-hči may be found below in (17) and (22)–(24).

Another relative root found in comparatives is initial taswi-/particle taswi ‘so much, so many.’ Taswi has an unusual distribution for a relative root: if it is not possible for it to appear as a stem-initial morpheme it surfaces as a separate word outside the verbal complex. It does not have the option of appearing as a preverb. Taswi is used for comparisons of the amount of something, such as in (13) where ‘turkey’ is the subject of the verb ‘lie in the bowl’ and the sentence asserts that the amount of turkey is greater than was previously there.

(13) ra-bíčaš a wasi=me ha meko taswi e hkekina-kanešiniči pene-wani.  
rabíčaš a wasi=me ha meko taswi e hkekina-kanešiniči pene-wani.  
also more.DIM=EMPH so.much AOR-lie.in.bowl-3/AOR turkey-OBV
‘and there was more turkey in the bowl [than before].’ (W231K)

Although taswi does not appear in preverb position, the syntactic effect of combining taswi with the verb is the same as in other relative root constructions: the valence of the verb is increased by adding a requirement for an oblique argument of a particular type; the particle a wasi me hi ‘more’ is the syntactic oblique associated with taswi.

Alongside the very specialized relative roots for expressing extent or amount, the more general relative root in-/isiki– associated with obliques of manner also often appears in comparatives. For example, it is used in
(14) with the verb ‘be a manitou, have spirit power,’ and in (15) with ‘be bad.’

(14) ne-nahiwina a-wasi meh hi ışi–maneto wiwa wisahke ha,
we-nahih wina a-wasi meh hi ışi–maneto–wiwa wi-sahke ha,
so,that’s it but more.DIM thus–be.spirit–3/IND W–SG
‘Oh, Wisahkeha has more spirit-power [than I].’ (W196)

(15) oni askači meh hi a-wasi meh meko e hanemisîmaya șawidi wi cawiwaka.
oni askači meh hi a-wasi meh meko e h-anemi–ışi–nya șawidi–ći
and,then later.DIM more.DIM=EMPH AOR-go.on–thus–be.bad–3/AOR
IC-wi cawiw-aka.
IC-be.with–1–3/PART/3
‘And then a little later on my husband got even worse [than before].’ (Auto125D)

In (16) the male speaker is lamenting the inadequacies of himself and his fellow men, saying first ‘we are like old women,’ and then going further to say ‘we are even worse’ (because old women can cook, and they cannot). The comparison in the second clause employs ışi–:

(16) șe–kimeko meh točimeko metemo hehaki nešawipena,
ke–ski=meko meh toči=meko metemoeheh–tiği ne–efsawi–pena,
only=EMPH like=EMPH old.woman.DIM–PL 1–be.thus–1–P/IND
a wasi moh cimeko neta–nešiwa tesipena,
a wasi=mo=hi=meko ne–efi–nešiwa tesi–pena.
more=even=EMPH 1–thus–be.destroyed–1–P/IND
‘We are only like old women, in fact we are even worse.’ (W181)

Now, since ışi– ‘thus’ can be used in comparatives, just like ahpi–hcí– ‘to such an extent,’ one might wonder if there is some way of predicting where each form appears. (17) and (18) are a near-minimal pair showing that each of these relative roots can be used with the verb kehke net– ‘know.’

(17) a wasi meh meko ahpi–hcí–kwe he kehke netamo șiwiwaki
a wasi meh hi=meko ahpi–hcí=mekwehe kehke netamo hi–waki
more.DIM=EMPH to.such.extent—I–believe know.DIM–3/IND
no–šiseme haki ke ko hi
ne–o–šiseme–h–aki ke ko hi
1–grandchild.DIM–PL something
‘I believe my grandchildren know something more [than they did before].’ (W237)

(18) ni name kwe–me kwo wiwa șisima kehke net–a
ni ne–me kwe kwo meko wiwa a wasi meh hi ne–ehi–kehke net–a
I=I–believe=EMPH but more.DIM 1–thus–know–1–O/IND
‘I believe I know more about it [than you do].’ (W228)

(17) contains ahpi–hcí– and asserts that the speaker’s grandchildren know more than they did before. In (18), using ışi–, the speaker asserts that he knows more than the addressee. Given the similarity between (17) and (18) we may perhaps conjecture that the two relative roots are interchangeable in comparative contexts.

The relationship between comparatives and relative roots becomes more complicated, however, when we look at the next set of examples. In these, the particle a wini ‘more’ is in construction with verbs bearing no relative root at all.

(19) ki–naye hapa, ni haka ne, a wasi ke–we–we–wet a ke ko hi,
ki–ni=y=he hapa, ni haka ne, a wasi ke–we–we–wet a ke ko hi,
you=it.turns.out friend.VOC more 2–control–2–O/IND something
‘My friend, it turns out that you have more control over things.’ (W512)

(20) sewe nami a wasimawiyo we mi–kawa sa.
wewe=ma=ni a wasi=meko=iyo we mi–kawa sa.
but–that more=EMPH=PAST be.strong–0/POT
‘that [other way] would have been much more powerful.’ (1880.16M)

(21) a wasimawiyo we mi–sha mi nene nekehke–neta.
a wasi=meko=iyo we mi–sha mi ne–nene nekehke–neta.
more=EMPH=PAST stored.pack–SG 1–think.about–1–O/IND
‘I really thought more about the sacred pack.’ (1880.17H)

At this point I do not have any generalization to suggest regarding the contexts in which it is possible to omit the relative root in comparative constructions.
‘AS MUCH AS’ COMPARATIVES

So far we have seen how Meskwaki uses the relative root construction to license the degree expression as an oblique argument of the verb. We have also seen that Meskwaki comparatives are most similar to Stassen’s conjoined type, and that the standard of comparison is frequently left unexpressed in textual examples. There is, however, a subtype of comparatives in which the standard of comparison is much less likely to be left implicit: the equative comparative, in which the target and standard are asserted to be at the same point on the scale of the dimensional predicate. In English, equative comparatives are expressed with ‘as much as’ or ‘John is as tall as Bill,’ etc. (22) is a Meskwaki example of an ‘as much as’ comparative:

(22) "manikohi kii:skwi e:hpì:kì:winakihkìki,
this=certainly sky-so IC-weigh.so.much-0/PART/OBL

that IC-weigh.so.much-0/PART/OBL 1-drumstick-SG

‘As much as this sky weighs, that is how much my drumstick weighs.’ (W501)

(22) is taken from a long text about the culture hero Wisahkeha; the context for (22) is that the Great Spirit has attempted to pick up Wisahkeha’s drumstick, but failed to even budge it. The structure of (22) is an equation, with zero copula, between two headless relative clauses. (Participle forms of verbs are used in relative clauses, with the final suffix of the participle providing information about the head of the relative clause.) Each of the two headless relative clauses in (22) has the oblique argument associated with the relative root a:hpì:ht- ‘to such an extent’ as the head of the relative clause. That is, the resulting relative clauses are glossed ‘the extent to which this sky weighs’ and ‘the extent to which my drumstick weighs.’ The two weights are asserted to be equal, in the utterance of (22).

EXPLICIT STANDARD EMBEDDED IN THE OBlique ARGUMENT

(23) is another ‘as much as’ example, but one with slightly different syntax. It is taken from the autobiography of a Meskwaki woman (Goddard 2006);

the context is that the author’s baby had died and they are preparing to perform the adoption ceremony. She is choosing a child who will be ritually adopted by the family in place of the deceased baby:

(23) maname’kwe:he e:hpì:kì:tepa:nakihke netapeno’hema
mànii=me’kwe:he \[IC-ahpí:lì:tepa:nakihke\] ne-apeno’hema
this,ANIM=1,believe IC-to.such.degree-love=13>PAST,PART/OBL 1-child-SG

e:hpì:kì:tepa:nasata
IC-ahpí:lì:tepa:nasata
IC-to.such.degree=be.loved-3>PART/3

‘I believe this is one who’s loved as much as I loved my baby.’ (Auto125B)

(23), like (22) above, contains two participle verbs functioning as relative clauses, but (23) is not an equational structure with a zero copula. To understand the syntax of (23), look first at the final verb in the sentence, which is a headless relative clause referring to the child she has chosen: e:hpì:kì:tepa:nasata ‘the one who is loved to such an extent.’ That verb includes the preverb ahpì:lì: – licensing an oblique argument. The oblique argument associated with ahpì:lì: is the headless relative clause to the verb’s left, indicated by brackets: e:hpì:kì:tepa:nakihke netapeno’hema ‘the extent to which I loved (in the past) my baby.’ What is interesting in (23) from the point of view of the typology of comparatives is that the standard of comparison is expressed inside the clausal oblique argument of the matrix verb, rather than being relegated to a second, conjoined clause or simply left implicit.

Moreover, the strategy of expressing the standard of comparison in an embedded clause is not limited to the ‘as much as’ comparatives, but can be found with the ordinary comparatives as well, as seen in (24):

more=EMPH IC-be.to.such.extent-3>PART/OBL 2-be.to.such.extent-2>DUB

‘you are probably greater than he is’ (W342)

In (24) the main verb appears at the end of the sentence, inflected for a second-person singular subject; the verb stem contains the relative root ahpì:hì: as an initial. The same verb stem appears to the left of the main
verb, here made into a participle form with the oblique of extent as its head, inflected for a third-person singular subject. It is the third-person subject of the participle verb which functions as the standard of comparison, while the second person subject of the main verb expresses the target. The particle a'wasī 'more' is combined with the participle e'hi:lc:awic:i to jointly constitute the oblique argument of the matrix clause, meaning literally 'more (than) how great he is.'

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that Meskwaki comparatives are most similar to the conjoined type of comparative construction in terms of the typology developed by Stassen (1985). However, the prototypical conjoined type permits expression of the standard of comparison only in the second conjunct of the two clauses, while Meskwaki does have the ability to express the standard of comparison in an embedded complement clause. This structural possibility is a consequence of the way in which Meskwaki verbs encode the dimensional predicate in comparatives: relative root morphology appears with the verbal predicate to license the degree expression as an oblique argument of the verb. Since it is possible for oblique arguments to be instantiated as headless relative clauses glossed 'the extent to which [X ...]' it is thus structurally feasible for the standard of comparison to be expressed as an argument of the clausal oblique. This is quite different from Stassen's prototypical conjoined pattern, and suggests that the crosslinguistic typology ought to be expanded to accommodate languages like Meskwaki.

Much more investigation is needed, of course, to understand the workings of the Meskwaki comparative construction, including a closer look at the different types of relative roots participating in comparatives, and the conditions under which no overt relative root appears on the scalar predicate. Given the Nishnaabemwin example cited in (4) of a particle comparative, it would also be extremely interesting to find out more about comparatives across the Algonquian family. The present paper is a small step in that direction.

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