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Varieties of English Comparative Sentences

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a synthetic study of English comparative sentences (i.e. the sentences containing such expressions as *more…than* and *as…as*), aiming to provide a useful guide or source material for busy classroom practitioners. Varieties of English comparative sentences are examined through the lenses of the following nine pairs of variables: (1) clausal/nonclausal comparison, (2) complete/incomplete comparison, (3) adjectival/adverbial comparison, (4) parallel/nonparallel comparison, (5) comparison of equality/inequality, (6) comparison for quantity/degree, (7) comparison between entities/states of affairs, (8) comparison on one/two scales, and (9) comparison of objectivity/assimilation. Syntactic behavior and semantic content of various comparative sentences are discussed in some important details. Finally, this paper concludes with a brief discussion of pedagogical implications.
***Key Words*:** comparison, English comparative sentences, comparative constructions

英文比較句之多樣性

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摘　要

本文為英文比較句（含 more…than 與 as…as 等辭之句子）之綜合性研究，可提供英語教學參考。英文比較句之多樣面貌及含義藉由下列各項因素加以整理並說明：（1）子句或非子句之比較，（2）完整或不完整之比較，（3）形容詞或副詞之比較，（4）對稱或不對稱之比較，（5）相等或不相等之比較，（6）數量或程度之比較，（7）實體或事態之比較，（8）單面或雙面之比較，（9）客觀或同化之比較。各式英文比較句之結構與語意有重點性之探討。文末並簡要討論英文比較句之教學實務。
關鍵詞：比較，英文比較句，比較結構

I. INTRODUCTION

Many English expressions can be used for comparison, such as *same*, *equal*, *similar*, *alike*, *distinction*, *differ*, *relatively*, *on the other hand*, *senior to*, *inferior to*, *prefer*, *more(…)than*, *as…as*, and so on. Of all such expressions for comparison, *as…as*, *less(…)than*, and *more(…)than* (including its inflectional counterparts like *smaller than* and irregular ones like *worse than*) show the most structural variety. They occur in a very wide range of comparative constructions and, in conjunction with other expressions in the same sentence, express a variety of meanings. The sentences in which these comparative expressions occur will be referred to in this paper as 'comparative sentences' and their sentential constructions as 'comparative constructions.'

Bredin [3] asserts that "there are no limits or constraints upon the things that can be compared." In particular, comparison is a much more common type of thought patterns in English than in Chinese. In many cases, an English comparative sentence expresses something that is not expressed via a comparative construction in Chinese. This is an interesting phenomenon mentioned by some scholars (e.g. Huang [9], Wu [26]). For one thing, a lady may be *as wise as fair*. For another, we may speak of someone as being *wiser than to believe an absurd rumor*. The Chinese equivalents of these two English comparative expressions in italics do not involve comparison. In addition, an English comparative sentence can be so complex that even some native speakers do not feel it acceptable when they examine it as an isolated sentence (cf. Pollard and Sag [18]), as illustrated in the following dialogue, where the sentence in italics is a case in point:

A: What a mismatched couple! I really don't see what a reasonably intelligent person like Chris sees in an intellectual zero like Dana.

B: Well, if you think they are mismatched, what about Kim and Sandy?

A: What do you mean? Do you think there's more of an intellectual gap between Kim and Sandy than there is between Chris and Dana?

B: (Pulling IQ test results out of file) Sure! In fact, according to these tests, Kim, Sandy, Chris, and Dana have IQs of 150, 90, 115, and 95, respectively. So *Kim is actually three times as much more intelligent than Sandy as Chris is (more intelligent) than Dana*. [18]
(italics added)

I have ever tried very hard but failed to translate the above comparative sentence in italics into a single Chinese comparative one, which demonstrates the structural and propositional complexity of English comparative sentences that may pose a considerable problem to Chinese learners of English.

Studies on English comparative constructions (e.g. Anderson [2]; Bredin [3]; Huddleston [10]; Kaplan [11]; Kennedy and Merchant [13]; Pollard and Sag [18]) usually deal with a few types of comparative constructions. Such is also the case with English grammar books (e.g., Close [4]; Frank [6]; Fuchs and Bonner [7]; Klammer, Schulz, and Volpe [14]; Lock [17]; Sinclair [23]; Thomson and Martinet [24]; Thornbury [25]). They usually devote most, if not all, of the space dealing with the structurally and semantically simpler types—those involving a comparison of two units with respect to their positions on a scale of degree or amount, as in:

(1) Michael Jordan played more aggressively than Allan Houston.
(2) Your coffee isn't as good as mine.

A more comprehensive account of English comparative constructions would be helpful to the teaching and learning of English, especially when the learners are native Chinese speakers.

This paper is a synthetic study of English comparative constructions based on comparative sentences collected from authentic materials (stories, newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, pop songs, and poetry) as well as grammar books [1, 4, 6, 10, 15, 21, 23, 24]. It aims to provide a more comprehensive examination of English comparative constructions as a useful guide or source material for busy classroom practitioners. Varieties of comparative sentences will be categorized and discussed in terms of the following nine pairs of variables:

(A) clausal/nonclausal comparison
(B) complete/incomplete comparison
(C) adjectival/adverbial comparison
(D) parallel/nonparallel comparison
(E) comparison of equality/inequality
(F) comparison for quantity/degree
(G) comparison between entities/states of affairs
(H) comparison on one/two scales
(I) comparison of objectivity/assimilation

Note that (A)-(D) are primarily syntactic variables since they are based on syntactic constituents of comparative sentences. On the other hand, (E)-(I) are semantic variables, involving propositional content of comparative constructions. (A), (B), (C), (E) and (F) are derived from English grammar books, but (D), (G), (H) and (I) have been observed by the author of this paper.

For convenience of discussion the comparative clause

introduced by the comparison marker *as* or *than* will be referred to as 'subclause,' and the remaining part of the sentence as 'main clause.' The subclause presents 'the standard of comparison.' Thus in the sentence *He is taller than I am*, we shall call *he is taller* main clause, and *than I am* subclause. Furthermore, the term 'comparative element' will apply to the word or word group complemented by the subclause, such as *taller*, *less important*, and *as often*.

Several links between the comparing process and the comparative sentence constitute the framework within which varieties of English comparative sentences are dealt with in this paper. First, comparison is the process of examining things in order to note their similarities and/or differences. A comparative sentence presents the result or one of the results of a comparison. Second, a comparison is often made between two things. In a comparative sentence, the subjects of the main clause and the subclause usually can be identified as the two things compared. Sometimes, the two things compared are in fact the same entity or state of affairs at two different times. The limitless things that can be compared add to the variety of comparative sentences. Third, it takes a standard to make a comparison. The standard of comparison is presented via the subclause (as in *He is taller than you are*) or the complement of the comparison marker (as in *He is taller than average*) or can be inferred from the context (as in *He is taller*). Finally, the purpose of making a comparison is often to discover in what respect(s) the things being compared are similar or different. In a comparative sentence, the comparative element (such as *taller* and *as tall*) represents a respect in which two things are or are not alike.

II. CLAUSAL AND NONCLAUSAL COMPARISON

A comparative sentence may contain a main clause plus a subclause introduced by the subordinator *than* or *as*, as is the case with (3)-(4):

(3) Peter can't jump so high as Billy can.

(4) For-profit nursing homes give worse care than public ones.

Kaplan [11] postulates that a special kind of ellipsis occurs in such subclauses as in (3)-(4). For example, the unabridged subclause in (3) is *Billy can jump (that) high*. The main clause *Peter can't jump so high* is the result of the comparison between *Peter can jump (that) high* and *Billy can jump (that) high*, the latter being the standard of comparison. Therefore the comparison is made between Peter and Billy in respect of their ability to jump high, as indicated by the two clauses. Since the standard of comparison is conveyed via a clause, we may call such comparison 'clausal comparison.'

Sometimes the standard of comparison is not expressed via a clause but via a smaller-than-clause constituent, as in:

(5) When you leave, you're more than a shadow. (pop song)

(6) He is taller than average.

(7) He is not as quick as me.

(8) Windows XP does more than make PCs stable.

(9) I'm wiser than to believe that.
(= I'm not so foolish as to believe that)

(10) Despite growing awareness of the problem, the overall picture remains less than rosy.

(11) This machine is worse than useless.

(12) Your kisses are hotter than hot.

(13) Everyone's heart screws up a little, sometimes as often as once a minute.

(14) There will be more than enough hot water.

(15) A: Jack is 6 foot 6 inches tall.
B: Is he as tall as that?

(16) Women now give birth to fewer than two children each.

(17) Any paper longer than 40 pages will be rejected automatically.

(18) The operation has a better than 95 percent success rate.

Sentences (5)-(18) are nonclausal comparison on the ground that the word or word group following *than* or *as* cannot be construed as being elliptical for a clause. Various classes of words (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, and numerals) and phrases (NPs, VPs, AdvPs, etc.) may follow the comparison marker *than* or *as* and constitute the standard of comparison.

As far as nonclausal comparison is concerned, the comparison marker *than* or *as* often functions as a preposition, with a noun phrase as its complement. And yet the standard of comparison is sometimes expressed by a mere adjective, as in (10)-(12). Quirk et al. [21] point out that *more than* may "convey a comment on the inadequacy of the linguistic expression." For example, in (12) the adjective *hot* is considered to be incapable of conveying the degree of heat that the speaker/hearer would like to express. I would like to add that (12) institutes a comparison between two degrees of heat: the actual degree of heat caused by the kisses and the degree of heat that the adjective *hot* signifies. Of course, (12) involves figurative or assimilative comparison. We shall return to this later.

III. COMPLETE AND INCOMPLETE COMPARISON

A comparison is often wound up with a clausal or nonclausal constituent that indicates the standard of

comparison. A complete comparative construction is one in which the standard of comparison is explicit (i.e. verbalized), as in (1)-(18). By contrast, an incomplete comparative construction is expressed by a sentence in which the standard of comparison is implicit (i.e. unverbalized) at the sentential level, as in (19)-(26):

(19) To make access even easier, many new computers have radio software bundled in.

(20) (I like the old menu.) The new one isn't as various.

(21) (He studies as many hours every day as she does.) But he doesn't make as much progress.

(22) Drive faster or we'll be late.

(23) The dollar, weaker last week against the yen and the euro, will make U.S. exports more attractive.

(24) Our goal is to make life with diabetes easier each and every day.

(25) He has spent the better part of his life working as a tireless civil rights activist.

(26) History shows that more active investors frequently get lower rates of return.

Implicit as it is at the sentential level, the standard of comparison in an incomplete comparative construction is clear from the textual and/or situational context. For example, the sentence *It's quieter outside* can mean that it's quieter outside than inside, that it's quieter outside now than a few minutes ago, and the like, depending on the context. In (19)-(21) an explicit element or state of affairs is compared with an implicit one. In (22)-(24) the comparison is between a changing element or state of affairs at two different times. Sentences (25)-(26) involve dichotomous division of an element or elements of the same type. For instance, (25) presupposes that there is one part of his life that is better than the other, and (26) that investors can be divided into two groups: one group is more active than the other.

The Chinese equivalents of English incomplete comparative sentences, as exemplified in (19)-(26), also involve comparison. But this is frequently not the case with the Chinese equivalents of English complete comparative sentences, such as (5)-(6) and (8)-(14).

IV. ADJECTIVAL AND ADVERBIAL COMPARISON

In English both adjectives and adverbs may be used to indicate a respect in which two things are different or similar. But many English grammar books distinguish between comparison with adjectives and that with adverbs. In English, comparison is made most often with the comparative forms of adjectives (as in (27)-(30)) or adverbs (as in (31)-(34)):

(27) Girls are twice as likely as boys to think they are overweight.

(28) Now one end of the pad is shaped wider than the other so you can place the absorbency where you need it most.

(29) Internet radio broadcasts contain far fewer ads than regular stations do.

(30) The Cubs started a more talented infield than the Sox.

(31) Girls today perhaps don't relate to feminism as much as their mothers do.

(32) Prices have been rising faster than incomes.

(33) He's less of an extrovert than his brother.

(34) She is more of a social animal than I am.

The comparative adjectives are used predicatively in (27)-(28) and attributively in (29)-(30). The comparative adverbs modify a verb phrase in (31)-(32) and an *of*-phrase in (33)-(34). Sentences (33)-(34) illustrate the comparative element *more/less of a (Adj) N*, which is seldom formally introduced in English grammar books. The only one grammar book that I have found touching upon this type of comparative sentence is Leech and Svartvik [16], where there is only one sentence describing the construction: "…comparison…can be applied to gradable countable nouns (like *success, fool, coward*) by the use of *more of a, as much of a, less of a*, etc." But other than that, we may also note that *much*, *more*, or *less* functions as an adverb modifying the following *of*-phrase. Therefore, *more*, *less*, and *as* in such a construction can be treated as a comparative adverb.

In English a comparative element may contain a noun. But in Chinese it is impossible for a comparative element to contain a noun.

V. PARALLEL AND NONPARALLEL COMPARISON

The main clause of a comparative sentence can be structurally parallel to the subclause, as illustrated below:

(35) Sam kicked the ball harder than Peter did.

(36) There are many more African Americans here than Chinese.

(37) People who want a smart, useful, affectionate pet will be much happier with a dog than they will be with a cat.

(38) It is as much a way of practicing speech as of practicing comprehension.

Note that the sharing of common lexical content is a feature of such structural parallelism. Usually the structure of the subclause is abbreviated to avoid redundancy of expressions. Ellipsis and use of pro-forms are the two devices to reduce the subclause. For example, in (35) the use of the pro-form *did* and ellipsis of the adverb *hard* reduce the

subclause into *Peter did*. The full form of the sub-clause is *Dennis kicked the ball (that) hard*, parallel to the main clause *Sam kicked the ball (that) hard*. The adverb *harder* in (35) is the comparative element that signifies the result of the comparison between two degrees. It is obligatory to omit the absolute form of the comparative element in the subclass. Other than that, everything omitted can be restored in the subclause. Therefore, the sentence *Sam kicked the ball harder than Peter kicked the ball* is still acceptable. But the reduced alternative (35) is generally preferable because it is more economical.

There are several types of structural nonparallelism between the main clause and the subclause. The first type is due to an intermediate clause under the main clause, as exemplified in (39)-(42):

(39) I love you more than I can say.

(40) AT&T's long distance business was rotting out far faster than the world realized.

(41) You may repeat the sentence as many times as you want.

(42) You are as brave a youth as I believe you to be.

Omitted in (39) is a whole *that*-clause: *that I love you (that) much*. But there is an intermediate clause (namely *I can say*) between the main clause and the *that*-clause. The combination of the intermediate clause and the *that*-clause constitutes the whole comparative subclause in (39). Such is also the case with (40). In (41)-(42) there is also an intermediate clause. And what is omitted is a whole or a part of the *to*-infinitive clause.

The second type of structural nonparallelism also involves subordination within subordination. But the subordinator used in the lower-level subordination is *when* or *if* instead of *that*, as in (43)-(44):

(43) These colors are as fresh as when they were painted.

(44) The Japanese have to pay ten times more for domestic rice than if they were able to buy it on the world market.

The complex comparative subclause in (43) is composed of two clauses: *these colors were (that) fresh* and *when they were painted*. What remains in the comparative subclause is a *when*-clause in (43) and an *if*-clause in (44).

The third type of nonparallel comparison subsumes a subjectless subclause, as the following examples indicate:

(45) The efforts will bring you more happiness than can ever be found in fun.

(46) The speaker spoke louder than was really necessary.

(47) As much food was wasted as was eaten in this restaurant.

The subclauses in (45)-(47) do not have a subject in their surface structures. Such subclauses usually contain the verb *to be* as the main verb or passive voice operator.

The last type of nonparallelism exhibits the greatest degree of reduction. The elliptical subclause may contain only one single word, as illustrated in (48)-(52):

(48) I won't stay longer than necessary.

(49) Our team played better than expected.

(50) Business was pretty much as usual.

(51) She goes to as few classes as possible.

(52) The competition is keener than ever (before).

The full form of the subclause in (48) is *it is necessary for me to stay (that) long*, and the full form in (49) is *it was expected that the team would play (that) well*. Some grammarians (e.g. Alexander [1]) simply treat such expressions as *than necessary*, *as usual*, *as possible*, and *than ever* as fixed phrases.

In fact, parallelism and nonparallelism discussed here are not two discrete categories. Parallelism here had better be conceived as a matter of more or less, rather than yes or no. It ranges along a continuous dimension, with such sentences as (35)-(38) at or near one extreme and (39)-(47) at or near the other. The following examples are of medium parallelism, (53)-(55) being closer to the extreme of nonparallelism than (56)-(58):

(53) The country expects results, and perhaps more quickly than the President can reasonably deliver.

(54) The downturn will be over almost as quickly as it became apparent.

(55) The professor gave me much more information than I can possibly use in my report.

(56) Your perfect A's and standing at the top of your class are not as impressive as they used to be.

(57) I left as depressed as I've ever been.

(58) He teaches me that getting old isn't as bad as it seems.

So far we have discussed English comparative sentences in terms of syntactic variables. In the remainder of this paper, we shall address English comparative sentence in terms of semantic variables.

VI. COMPARISON OF EQUALITY AND COMPARISON OF INEQUALITY

A comparison between two units may indicate that one thing is equal or approximately equal to the other in a certain aspect. English speakers use the following expressions to phrase a comparison of equality: *as…as*, *no more(…)than*—including such an inflectional form as *no larger than*—*not(…)any more than*, *little more(…)than*, *no less(…)than*, *not(…)any less than*, and *little less(…)than*. Here are some examples:

(59) He found riding as tiring as walking.

(60) I would no more think of hitting a student than I would a policeman.

(61) The job is no better than a common laborer's.

(62) One who fails to control English sociolinguistic variables does not know English, any more than one who fails to know the grammar and words.

(63) The issues will be no less important than they are today.

(64) There is little less trouble in governing a private family than a whole kingdom.

The occurrence of the negative word *no* or *little* before the degree word *more* or *less* turns a comparison of inequality into that of approximate equality. But when the negator *not* is used instead of *no*, the resulting sentence does not necessarily express an equal comparison. For, logically speaking, the statement *This job is not better than that* entails *This job is as good as that* or *This job is worse than that*.

Sentence (59) is an ordinary comparison of equality. And yet (60)-(64) further emphasize the speaker's attitude or feeling toward the things being compared. For example, in saying (60), the speaker compares the unlikelihood of his hitting a student with that of his hitting a policeman, and hence emphasizes the improbability of his intention to hit a student. In (61), the speaker compares the job in question with a common laborer's job, thus emphasizing the inferiority of the job being compared.

An unequal comparative sentence contains one of the following expressions: *more(…)than* — including such an inflectional form as *harder than*—*less(…)than*, *not(…)as…as*, *not(…)so…as*, multiplier + *as…as*, and vulgar fraction + *as…as*, as in the following:

(65) The treatment of animals in movies, television shows and commercials is significantly better today than it was two or three decades ago.

(66) We tried a Dialpad IP calling card and found the voice quality less crisp than on a regular connection.

(67) The country doesn't require words so much as actions.

(68) The study is about twice as large as the living room, but the study contains about two-thirds as much furniture.

The occurrence of the negator *not* (as in (67)), of a multiplier (as in (68)), or of a vulgar fraction (as in (68)) brings about an unequal comparison in the sentence that would otherwise present an equal comparison.

As shown in (59)-(68), English equal and unequal comparative constructions allow speakers/writers to express varying degrees of similarity or difference between two things.

VII. COMPARISON FOR QUANTITY AND COMPARISON FOR DEGREE

Comparative sentences may be aimed for quantity or degree. Consider the following examples:

(69) Throughout the world there are more native speakers of Spanish than there are of English.

(70) (Mr. Attorney, your fee is too high.) All the other lawyers charged one-fifth as much.

(71) She's as good an actress as she is a singer.

(72) He thinks it safer to drive himself than to let me drive.

(73) Several excuses are always less convincing than one.

Obviously, (69)-(70) are comparison for quantity. Sentence (71) shows a comparison to the same degree, (72) to a higher degree, and (73) to a lower degree. Only quantifiers (e.g., *much*, *many*, *more*, and *less*) can serve as the comparative element for quantitative comparison. And when they are used for that purpose, they function as a determiner or pronoun in the sentence. The periphrastic element *as*, *more*, or *less* (as in *more important*), when used for degree comparison, always functions as an adverb.

We have to admit that the distinction between quantity and degree is not always hard and fast. Rather, it is a continuum. The following examples represent the instances that may be thought of as occupying medium points between the two extremes on the scale:

(74) We do not say I love you as often as we should.

(75) He stayed longer than we expected.

In addition, two synonymous comparative sentences could be considered as comparison for quantity and for degree respectively. For example:

(76) She has more patience than I have.

(77) She is more patient than I am.

In (76), the quantifier *more* modifies the noun *patience*; therefore, the sentence may be interpreted as a quantitative comparison. In (77) the comparative element is a gradable adjective denoting a property. In general, properties cannot be quantified easily, but can vary along a continuous scale in terms of degree. For this reason, (77) may be counted as a comparison for degree.

It may be that the above-mentioned medium cases can undermine the significance of the distinction between the comparison for quantity and that for degree. However, there are cases in which both types of comparison take place in the same sentence, which indicates that the distinction between quantity and degree is still significant. Quite a few English grammar books (e.g., Holschuh [8]) tell English learners not to use both *more* and the comparative suffix *–er* together. The sentence *He is more taller than you*, according to this rule, will

be designated as being ungrammatical. But when a basketball coach says, 'We need more taller players,' the use of the word sequence *more taller* is completely grammatical. For the word *more* occurs as a quantifier modifying the noun phrase *taller players*. There is a quantitative comparison in the utterance. Beyond that, the inflectional comparative element *taller* modifies the noun head *players*, indicating a comparison of degree.

VIII. COMPARISON BETWEEN ENTITIES AND COMPARISON BETWEEN STATES OF AFFAIRS

A comparison may be established between two entities. Some examples are given below:

(78) Intrauterine devices may be as safe as other forms of birth control.

(79) The U.S. now accepts proportionally fewer legal immigrants than do many Western European states.

(80) The female white shark grows even larger than the male.

(81) Tom acts in films more often than John does in plays.

(82) This is a bigger car than the garage will take.

(83) They sell better shirts than they do ties.

(84) Mr. Wilson treats his car better than he does his wife.

(85) His thick glasses make his eyes seem twice as large as they really are.

Sentences (78)-(81) express a comparison between two entities denoted by the subject of the main clause and subclause respectively. The comparative element (e.g., *as safe* in (78)) is indicative of the aspect in which the two entities being compared are regarded as equal or unequal. In (82) the comparison is between the size of the car and the capacity of the garage. In (83) the two entities compared are the shirts and ties some people sell. In (84) Mr. Wilson's car is compared with his wife with respect to his treatment. In (85) the comparison is between the actual size of his eyes and the size of his eyes that appear through the thick glasses.

Comparison between two states of affairs is illustrated below:

(86) He is working much harder than he used to.

(87) I don't think there was as much pressure as there is today.

(88) We now spend less money on periodicals than last year.

(89) I'm happier than I've ever been.

(90) Inside a Mercedes-Benz, you are as safe as you can possibly be on the road.

(91) If you need money, take that fast-food restaurant job, and then try to make the experience as meaningful as you can.

(92) He worked as efficiently as he should.

(93) There were fewer people here than there.

(94) Sue screamed, not loudly, more in surprise than terror.

(95) In our diplomacy and alliances, we assumed that the world needed us more than we needed them.

(96) He speaks more quickly than his secretary can take dictation.

Compared in (86)-(89) are two states of affairs connected with a single entity (usually denoted by the subject of the main clause) at two different times. In (90) an actual state is compared with a state that can be achieved to the driver's greatest advantage. In (91) the comparison is between a prospective state and a desirable state that can be accomplished by the hearer to the best of his ability. Sentence (92) exemplifies a comparison between an actual and an ideal state of affairs. Sentence (93) is a comparison of two states of affairs in two different locations. Sentences (94)-(95) involve two affective states. Finally, in (96), what are compared are two physical states.

IX. ONE-SCALE AND TWO-SCALE COMPARISON

More often than not, a comparative sentence describes a comparison between two things in respect of their positions on a single scale of degree or quantity:

(97) Tigers are fiercer than rhinos.

(98) She is not as wise as you.

According to Kennedy [12] a scale can be defined as "a linearly ordered, infinite set of points", associated with a dimension that indicates a kind of measurement, and a degree can then be regarded as "a nonempty subset of a scale" (ibid.). The comparative element (such as *fiercer* in (97) and *as wise* in (98)) maps the things being compared onto the scale. Thus the meaning of (97) can be paraphrased as 'the degree to which tigers exceed a normal standard of fierceness is greater than the degree to which rhinos exceed the standard.' In other words, mapped onto a scale of fierceness, tigers occupy a subset of the scale closer to the extreme point of fierceness than rhinos, as shown in Figure 1.

Occasionally, a comparison is made of a single entity on a single scale, as in examples (99)-(100).

Fig. 1. A scale of fierceness

(99)He is more good than bad.

(100)They pulled him out of the water more dead than alive.

English grammar books (e.g. Quirk et al. [21]; Leech and Svartvik [15]) usually construe such one-scale comparisons in the following way:

(101)It's more accurate to say that he is good than that it is bad. (= (99))

(102)When they pulled him out of the water, he might have been better described as dead rather than alive. (= (100))

It follows that sentences such as (99)-(100) involve a comparison between the degrees of adequacy of two expressions.

Sometimes a comparative sentence presents a comparison between the positions of a single entity or state on two different scales. For example:

(103)Tigers can be as gentle as they are fierce.

(104)She is as wise as fair.

(105)The dish tastes as good as it looks.

(106)Their beliefs are more Christian than Buddhist.

(107)The idea of mobile communication was more futuristic fantasy than fact until the early 1980s.

(108)He is not so much an artist as a businessman.

(109)He's more like a film star than a lifeguard, really.

In (103) the adjective *fierce* sharply differs in meaning from the adjective *gentle*. But the word *fierce*, as used to describe animals, is not the direct opposite of *gentle*. The exact antonym of *fierce* in that sentential context should be *tame*, and the exact antonym of *gentle* should be *rough* or *harsh* (cf. *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms*). Therefore, we may say that (103) expresses a comparison involving two scales: gentleness and fierceness. It is generally easier to notice that tigers are fierce than to notice that they are gentle. As a normal process of elaboration, what is less perceptible (presented in the main clause) is compared with what is more perceptible (presented in the subclause as a standard of comparison). Similar interpretations apply to (104)-(109) as well. Take, as a further example, Sentence (106). Procter et al. [20] construe (106) as "they have a larger number of Christian characteristics than Buddhist ones." It should be clear from the foregoing that (106) does not deny that their beliefs are Buddhist since they still have a certain number of Buddhist characteristics. Thus our degree-based interpretation is no less precise: 'The degree to which their beliefs are Christian is greater than the degree to which their beliefs are Buddhist.'

Note that the adjectives in (103)-(105) are gradable, while those in (106) are not. The inflectional comparative form of a nongradable adjective can never serve as a comparative element, except figuratively:

(110)The terrorist is deader than a doornail.
(Praninskas [19])

(111)* This soldier is deader than that.

(112)* They pulled him out of the water deader than alive.

On the other hand, the periphrastic comparative form of a nongradable adjective may be used to present a two-scale comparison, as in (106), and a comparison between degrees of adequacy of two expressions, as in (100).

Sentences (107)-(108) show that noun phrases may also serve as the comparative elements of a two-scale comparison. As to the cases in which two adverbials occurring as the comparative elements within one single sentence, I have not found any examples yet.

Occasionally a two-scale comparison is between two different entities or states of affairs, as in:

(113)After she swallowed the drink, Alice discovered that she was shorter than the doorway was low.

(114)Mary played the violin more skillfully than her father conducted the orchestra.

Sentence (113) means that the degree to which Alice was short was greater than the degree to which the doorway was low, implying that Alice has become short enough to enter a room through the low doorway without bending down. Such a degree-based interpretation applied to (114) as well.

As a matter of fact, two-scale comparison does not exist in Chinese. Therefore, English two-scale comparative sentences can not be translated into Chinese sentences containing a comparative element.

X. OBJECTIVE AND ASSIMILATIVE COMPARISON

In a recent paper, Shie [22] has drawn a line between objective and assimilative comparison. Up to this point all the examples cited in this paper, except (12) and (110), are objective comparisons. They examine two things to see how they are alike (comparison of equality) or how they are different (comparison of inequality). On the other hand, an assimilative comparison associates a scale of some property with two basically incompatible things, as exemplified in:

(115)You should have a softer pillow than my heart.
(Lord Byron; to his wife, who had rested her head on his breast)

(116)And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke.
(John Donne; thy stroke = death's stroke)

(117)She was beaten by unseeded Julie Harlard of France, 6-

3, 2-3, 6-3, in a second-round match that had more ups and downs than a roller-coaster.

(118) Such a change is less significant than a bug.

(119) How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.
(William Shakespeare; *King Lear*)

(120) There are as many reasons as there are bumps in the road for you to find yourself behind the wheel of a Mazda 324 4WD.

(121) Jealousy is cruel as the grave.
(*Bible*: Song of Solomon)

(122) The other men in the car were scattered along the wall, their dusty faces as empty as their pockets.

(123) As imperceptibly as grief
The summer lapsed away
(Emily Dickinson)

(124) Before
I opened my mouth
I noticed them sitting there
as orderly as frozen fish
in a package
(D. C. Berry; them = a senior class at a high school)

(125) Black girl black girl
lips as curved as cherries
full as grape bunches
sweet as blackberries
(Dudley Randall)

In (115)-(125), the two things compared are much more different than similar. To illustrate, in (115), the two things compared are 'a pillow' and 'the speaker's heart' (or its metonymic referent: 'the speaker's breast'). A scale of softness is associated with them. In such an objective comparison as *This pillow is softer than that* or *The mattress is even softer than the pillow*, the two things compared are semantically close since they belong to a certain class of things, namely parts of beds. Therefore the scale of softness is tangible. But in (115) 'a pillow' is so semantically distant from 'the speaker's heart/breast' that the spotlighted scale of softness would otherwise be intangible. In other words, such comparisons as in (115)-(125) liken two basically unlike things, hence the name 'assimilative comparison.'

Assimilative comparison is a linguistic device that enables a writer/speaker to create language anew in that it makes what is incongruous meaningful. It frequently occurs in literary, advertising, and journalistic discourse. As (115)-(125) show, assimilative comparison can strike readers/hearers with new, unexpected images or impressions and constitute units of compressed meaning.

It should be noted that the degree word *as* may be deleted in an assimilative comparison of equality, as in (121). If we delete the degree word *as* in (122) and (125), the resulting sentences are still acceptable provided that we do not consider rhythm and meter. But such deletion of *as* cannot apply to adverbial assimilative comparison (such as (123) and (124)), neither can it apply to assimilative comparison for quantity (such as (120)). To be brief, it applies only to an assimilative comparison for degree where the comparative element is an adjective.

XI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have tried, through discussion of examples, to elucidate the variance of English comparative sentences. In order to sort out various comparative constructions, I have proposed nine pairs of variables. They can cast some light on the syntactic and semantic complicacies of English comparative sentences, at least for nonnative learners of English.

According to Ellis' theory of instructed SLA [5], input can become implicit knowledge through the following operations: noticing, comparing, and integrating. ESOL material writers and teachers should induce students to notice specific features of English comparative constructions in the input. And then students can compare the noticed features with the features they typically produce in output so that they will integrate the noticed features into their interlanguage systems. For example, at intermediate levels or above, nonparallel comparative constructions can be brought to students' attention in that nonparallelism of English sentences, as shown in Section V, is quite irregular. As far as Chinese learners of English are concerned, another feature to be noticed is two-scale comparison since it does not exist in the Chinese language. Furthermore, assimilative comparisons can be emphasized by virtue of their creative nature and figurative meanings.

Research has shown that it is difficult for learners to acquire full grammatical competence through classroom communication and that feedback containing formal corrections may aid the acquisition of some difficult grammatical features [5]. By evaluating the syntactic and semantic complexity of various comparative constructions, material writers and teachers can determine which types of comparative constructions should be taught and which types students can acquire on their own naturally. In the same way, teachers can determine the sequence in which they should teach certain types of comparative constructions and the amount of class time that they should devote to teaching them.

Different groups of nonnative-speaking students may feel

different degrees of difficulty in learning English comparative sentences. Teaching classes of the same first language background, teachers may examine their students' writing assignments or translation exercises and identify the types of comparative constructions that have caused difficulties for their students. The nine pairs of variables proposed in this paper may serve as a diagnostic and an instructional framework for teaching English comparative sentences.

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