

Ambiguity and the Internal Structure of Comparative Complements in Greek

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1 Introduction

ambiguous comparative constructions in English (cf. Bresnan 1973):

- (1) I saw a taller woman **than my mother**.
- (A) ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.’
(B) ‘I saw a taller woman than my mother is.’

question: what causes ambiguity (English and cross-linguistically)

- purely clausal analysis (see Bresnan 1973, Lechner 2004):
two different underlying structures (full clauses)
- purely phrasal analysis (cf. Hankamer 1973 for the phrasal analysis of *than*):
no underlying structure, multiple associations

Greek: three types of comparatives

- *ap’oti* ‘than’ – clausal
- *apo* ‘from’ + accusative DP – phrasal (?)
- genitive – phrasal

proposal: ambiguity in cases like (1) with various underlying structures (not necessarily clauses)

2 Clausal comparatives

reading (A): a lexical, tensed verb is reconstructed (predicate: verb)

- (2) I saw a taller woman than my mother ~~saw an x-tall woman~~.

degree expression (*x-tall woman*) would be eliminated in English anyway
(Bresnan 1973, Kennedy 2002, Bacskai-Atkari 2014c)

the subclause has the tense specification of the matrix clause

→ full clause (with a TP) underlyingly

reading (B): a predicative relation is reconstructed, not tensed (predicate: adjective)

- (3) a. I saw a taller woman than my mother ~~BE an x-tall woman~~.
b. I can't imagine a braver woman than Queen Boudicca ~~BE an x-brave woman~~.

paraphrase of (3a) in the present ↔ paraphrase of (3b) in the past
influence of pragmatics, context etc.

further evidence for tensed/tenseless distinction: German (see Bacskai-Atkari 2014b)

ambiguity when nominative/accusative syncretism, no ambiguity when case distinction:

- (4) a. Ich habe eine größere Frau **als meine Mutter** gesehen.
I have a taller woman than my.F.NOM/ACC mother seen
'I saw a taller woman than my mother.'
b. Ich habe einen größeren Mann **als mein Vater** gesehen.
I have a taller man than my.M.NOM father seen
'I saw a taller man than my father saw.'
c. Ich habe einen größeren Mann **als meinen Vater** gesehen.
I have a taller man than my.M.ACC father seen
'I saw a taller man than my father is.'

no default accusative (Schütze 2001), accusative available for small clause subjects

analysis:

- nominative remnants: clausal ellipsis, nominative case assigned by finite inflection
- accusative remnants: remnants of small clauses, case assigned by matrix verb

→ elements like *than* or *als* 'than' may take both TP and PredP (small clause) complements (on small clauses as PredPs, cf. Matushansky 2012, following Bowers 1993)

Greek clausal comparatives with *ap'oti* 'than':

- (5) a. Eida mia gynaika psiloteri **ap'oti i mitera mou**.
saw.1SG a woman taller than the.NOM mother my
'I saw a taller woman than my mother saw.'
b. *Eida mia gynaika psiloteri **ap'oti ti mitera mou**.
saw.1SG a woman taller than the.ACC mother my
'I saw a taller woman than my mother.'

accusative remnants available after *ap'oti* if they are object remnants of tenses clauses:

- (6) a. S'agapo perissotero **ap'oti i** **Maria**.
I.love.you more than the.NOM Mary
'I love you more than Mary loves you.'
- b. S'agapo perissotero **ap'oti ti** **Maria**.
I.love.you more than the.ACC Mary
'I love you more than I love Mary.'

Greek clausal comparative pattern:

- no accusative case remnant available → complement of *ap'oti* cannot be a PredP in the German way
- nominative remnant not ambiguous → reconstruction of a predicative relation with an adjectival predicate should involve a tenseless clause (tenseless–tenseless match), but *ap'oti* always takes a TP complement

3 Phrasal comparatives

Germanic: comparatives introduced by an element corresponding to *than* – C-element

single PPs attested in other languages – including KPs (lexical case)

Italian (*di* 'of'), Polish (genitive), Russian (genitive), Hungarian (adessive)

lexical cases: instances of PP (see e.g. Asbury 2005; 2008)

KP the lowest PP layer, immediately above the DP; KP tops off the nominal projection, projections of higher P constitute a different extended projection (Den Dikken 2010, cf. also Dékány & Hegedűs 2014 on Hungarian)

Greek genitive comparative (dated): only reading (B) available

- (7) Eida mia gynaika psiloteri **tis** **miteras** **mou**.
saw.1SG a woman taller the.GEN mother.GEN my
'I saw a taller woman than my mother is.'

similar pattern in other languages with true phrasal comparatives

Greek genitive comparative not available in contexts where no tenseless match is available:

- (8) *S'agapo perissotero **tis** **Marias**.
I.love.you more the.GEN Mary.GEN
'I love you more than Mary.'

Greek phrasal comparative pattern:

- genitive PP (KP): K head takes a single DP complement → no tense specification possible – no ambiguity
- tenseless – tenseless match satisfied – reconstruction of a predicative relation with adjectival predicate always possible

4 A special hybrid comparative in Greek

so far: predictable behaviour of clausal vs. phrasal comparatives in constructions like (1)

third type of Greek comparatives: introduced by *apo* ‘from’

- (9) Eida mia gynaike psiloteri **apo ti mitera mou.**
saw.1SG a woman taller from the.ACC mother my
‘I saw a taller woman than my mother.’
(preference: ‘than my mother is’ > ‘than my mother saw’)

preposition *apo* takes accusative DP complements

potential ambiguity:

- (10) S’agapo perissotero **apo ti mitera mou.**
I.love.you more from the.ACC mother my
‘I love you more than my mother.’

ambiguity with true phrasal comparatives attested cross-linguistically for the type in (10)
but not for the types in (9)

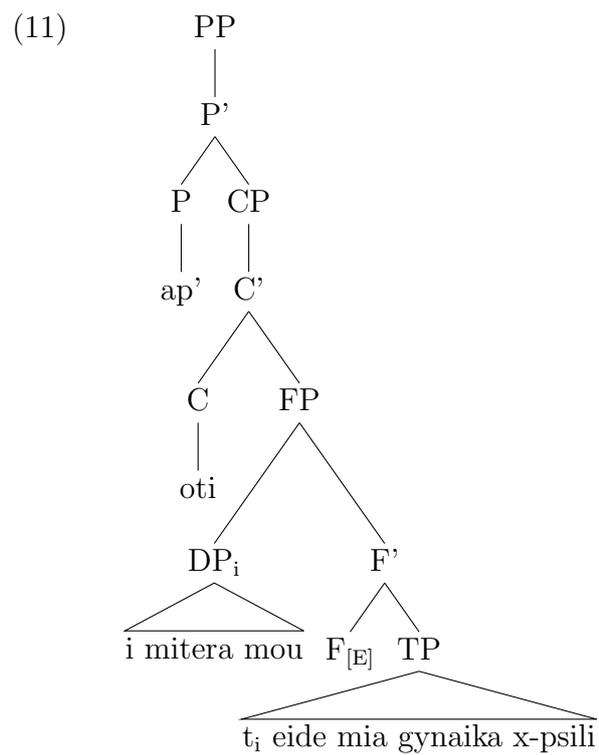
German-type accusative remnant different: restricted to constructions like (1), accusative
due to matrix verb ↔ Greek *apo* + accusative DP has a wide distribution, just like
true phrasal comparatives, accusative independent of matrix verb

adopting the analysis of Merchant (2009): P head *apo* takes a CP complement

- *ap’oti* is a complex form involving a preposition *ap’*, a shortened form of *apo*, and the relativiser *oti*, which otherwise occurs in free relatives (Merchant 2009: 137)
- *ap’* takes a CP, which hosts *oti* in its specifier; remnant (if there is ellipsis) moves to an FP below the CP, no further movement to CP/PP (Merchant 2009: 149–151)
- *apo* also takes a CP, which contains no visible element, and the remnant DP moves up to the specifier of the PP; *apo* moves up to a higher p head position (Merchant 2009: 151–156, as “option 1” for accounting for island effects related to movement)

different assumption regarding the status of *oti*: a C head, not an operator (↔ Merchant 2009) – *oti* licensed even in cases where it cannot be the degree operator itself, and there is only one comparative/relative operator (cf. Bacskai-Atkari 2014c: 117–118, 223–226, Bacskai-Atkari 2014a: 497–499 for a similar argumentation for German *wie* ‘as/how’) – subcomparatives (Giannakidou & Yoon 2011: 630)

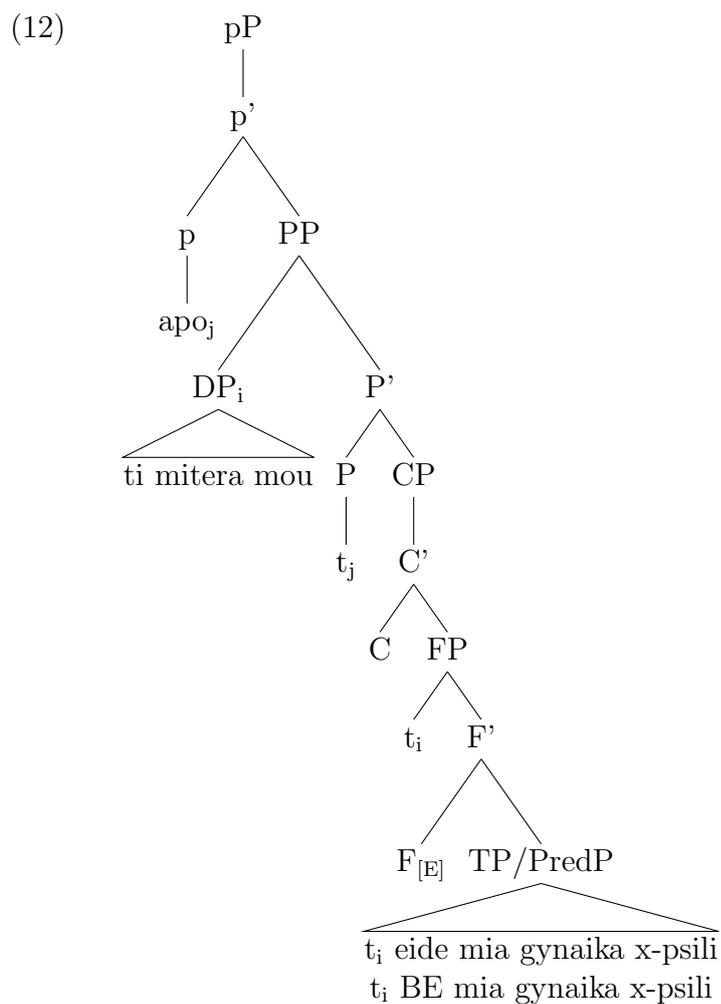
structure of (5a) (based on Merchant 2009: 149, ex. 43b):



properties:

- subject DP *i mitera mou* ‘my mother’ remains below the CP → no case assignment possible from the matrix verb or from the P head
- finite CP – a headless relative clause, where the C-element *oti* specifies the [+nominal] nature of the clause

structure of (10) (based on Merchant 2009: 152, ex. 45b):



properties:

- subject DP *ti mitera mou* ‘my mother’ receives accusative case from the P/p head *apo* – if base-generated in a TP, the original nominative case is overridden by the accusative (cf. Merchant 2009), if base-generated in a PredP (matching the tenseless relation in the matrix clause), it receives no nominative originally at all
- finite CP – no overt element that could make the clause [+nominal]

some questions regarding (11) and (12)

question 1: why *apo* but not *ap'* moves up to p

- *apo* moves from P to p anyway: more general property (cf. Lechner & Anagnostopoulou 2005)
- *ap'* is a clitic that cliticises onto the C head
- *apo* moves to p in order to assign case to its complement DP, which is located in [Spec,PP]

question 2: why the DP moves up to PP with *apo* but not with *ap'*

- both P heads are [+comparative], which is a feature passed on to the C head of the complement, on which it is interpretable → CP selected because of the [+comparative] nature
- P heads otherwise select a nominal complement
- *ap'* selects a CP containing *oti*, which makes the CP [+nominal], as a headless relative clause
- *apo* selects a CP without *oti*, which is not a free relative clause (no such requirement on comparative subclauses in general) → the nominal argument of the P head can be realised only by upward movement of the DP to the [Spec,PP] position, and the P head *apo* moves up to p, hence the DP argument is within its complement

question 3: why a PredP is licensed under *apo* but not under *ap'*

- no nominative case assigned within PredP
- external case assignment available only with *apo* because it attracts the DP to the PP; with *ap'*, the DP would remain in the CP and caseless

question 4: so why are *ap'oti*-comparatives not ambiguous and *apo*-comparatives ambiguous in constructions like (1)

- no PredP licensed under *ap'oti* due to case-assignment requirements; TP for predicative relation in (1) not available either because no tense antecedent in the matrix clause, and only recoverable material can be elided (cf. Merchant 2001)
- with *apo*, both a TP and a PredP possible since the DP moves up to the PP anyway; PredP-reconstruction is more faithful to the surface pattern, no case reassignment involved (hence some preference probably)

5 Conclusion

potentially ambiguous comparative constructions in Greek – three types of comparatives

- true clausal comparatives with *ap'oti* ‘than’: not ambiguous – tensed clause licensed to be reconstructed only with an underlying lexical verb, no external case assignment
- true phrasal comparatives with the genitive – not ambiguous, only tenseless relation recoverable (limited)
- mixed phrasal comparatives with *apo* ‘from’ – ambiguous, obligatorily elliptical clause either tensed or tenseless, remnant moves up to PP and is assigned accusative case

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