

# Relative features and lower complementisers in West-Germanic comparatives

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## Introduction

two major kinds of degree comparatives: comparatives expressing equality, as in (1a), and comparatives expressing inequality, as in (1b)

- (1) a. Mary is as tall **as** Peter (is).  
b. Mary is taller **than** Peter (is).

Dutch allows a combination of *alsdan* and *dat* (Bacskai-Atkari & Baudisch 2018):

- (2) a. %Emma is even oud **als dat** Peter is.  
Emma is so old as that Peter is.  
'Emma is as old as Peter is.'  
b. %Emma is ouder **dan dat** Peter is.  
Emma is older than that Peter is.  
'Emma is older than Peter is.'

same pattern not attested in English and German → question: what the status of *dat* in (2) is

## Comparatives and degree

degree comparatives have three important components:

- a gradable predicate (AP) in the matrix clause
- a degree element (e.g. *-er*) in the matrix clause
- a comparative subclause

English:

- (3) Mary is **tall-er** [than Peter is].

comparison without degree also possible:

- (4) I would **rather** run the Marathon [than eat Brussels sprouts].

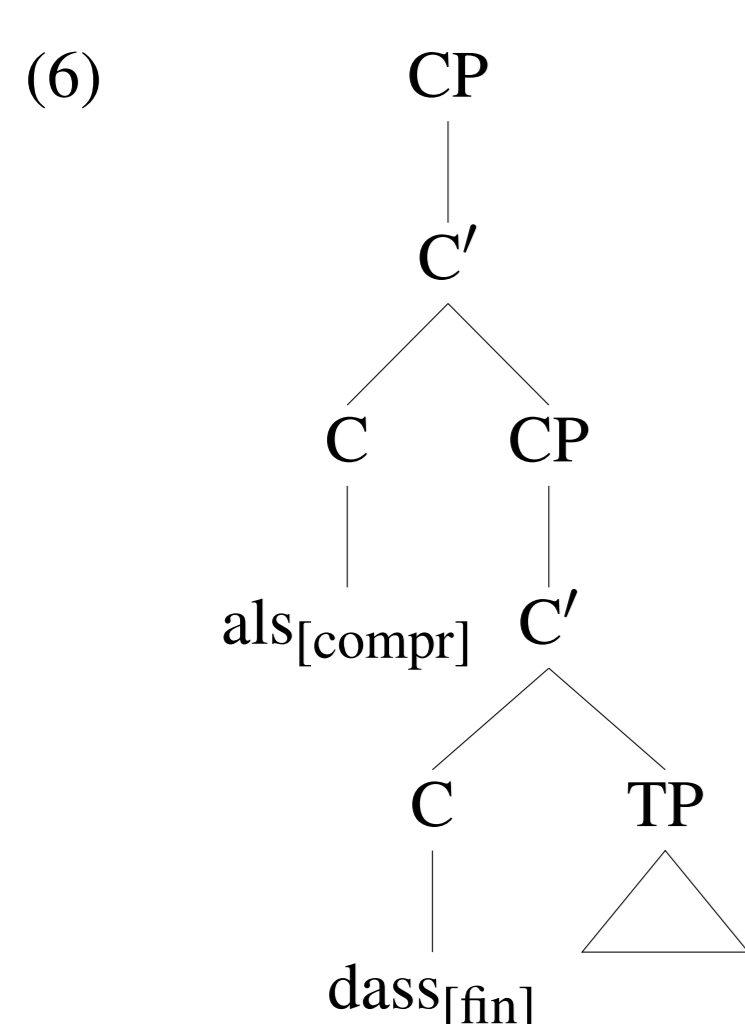
elements:

- a degree-like element like *rather* in the matrix clause
- a comparative subclause

non-degree comparatives allow *dass* in German – comparing two propositions:

- (5) a. Sie geht **lieber** ins Kino **als dass** sie zu Hause studiert.  
she goes rather in.the.N cinema than that she at home studies  
'She rather goes to the cinema than studies at home.'  
b. Es ist **zu** schön, **als dass** es wahr sein könnte.  
it is too nice than that it true be could.SBJV.3SG  
'It is too nice to be true.'

structure:



role of *dass*: marking finiteness; it types clauses that are complete propositions

same pattern attested in Dutch but not in English

→ asymmetry in German: Dutch *dat* in degree comparatives has to do with the degree property

## Comparatives and relative markers

degree comparative clauses involve operator movement to the left periphery (Bacskai-Atkari 2018, following Kennedy 2002 and Chomsky 1977):

- (7) %Mary is taller **than how tall** Peter is.

lower CP in comparatives hosts relative operators (Bacskai-Atkari 2016) – comparatives with an overt lower CP regularly non-elliptical in Germanic (just like ordinary relative clauses)

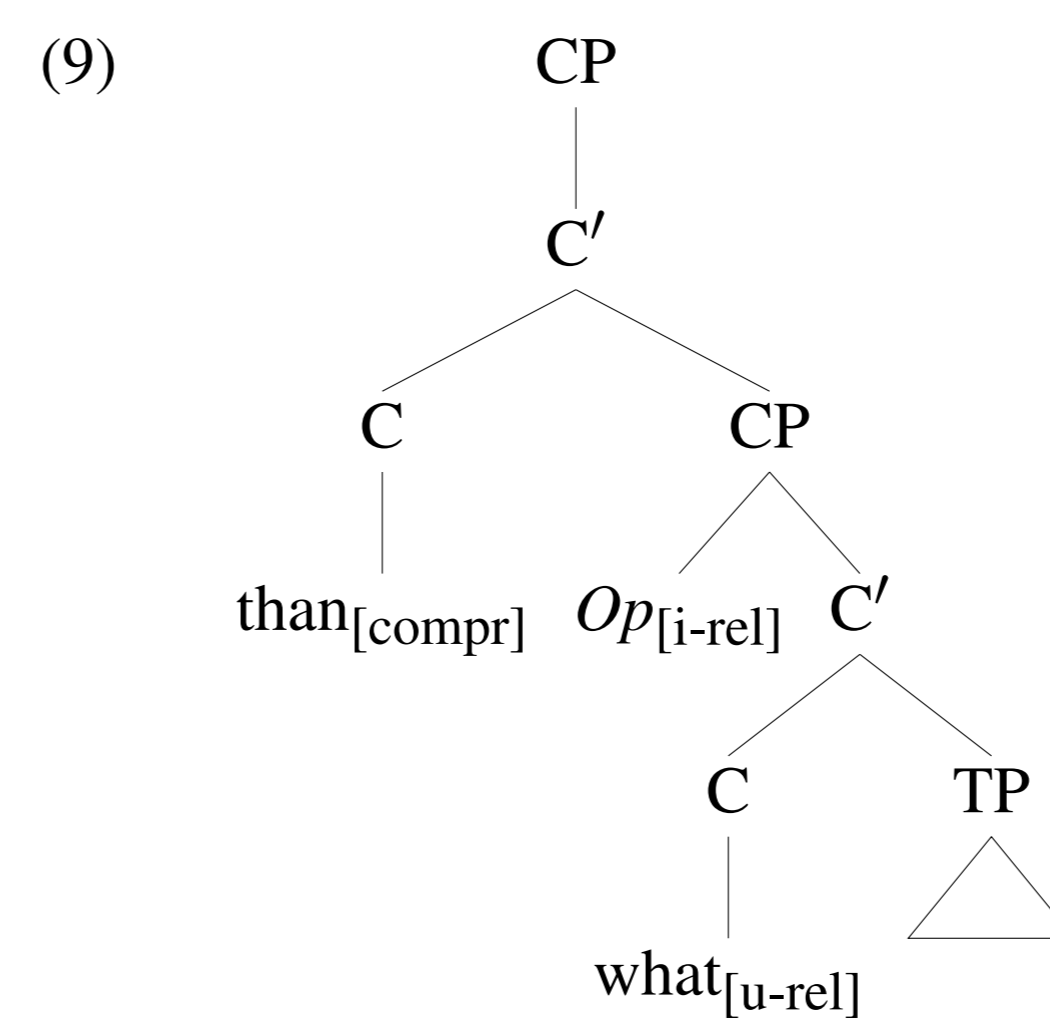
*wh*-elements are underspecified for [rel]:

- they can occur in [-rel] contexts (interrogatives, which are complete propositions, Watanabe 2009)
- they can (potentially) occur in [+rel] contexts (ordinary relative clauses, which are not complete propositions: they contain a gap)

the relative CP can also have an overt relative head in comparatives (Bacskai-Atkari 2016):

- (8) %Mary is taller **than what** Peter is.

structure:



complementiser *what* does not type the clause as relative (*what* not licensed in non-free relatives either) → additional comparative CP possible

## Relative elements in West Germanic

relative pronouns (sensitive to matrix noun head):

- *d*-pronouns: regular West-Germanic pattern (Brandner & Bräuning 2013) – German (*der/die/das*), Dutch (*die/dat*)
- *wh*-pronouns: English (since Middle English), German (restricted/formal), Dutch (dialectal, see Boef 2013)

relative complementisers (not sensitive to matrix noun head):

- *d*-complementisers: English *that*, restricted: Flemish *dat* (mostly co-occurring with a *wh*-pronoun, see Bennis & Haegeman 1984, rarely even on its own, see Boef 2013)
- *wh*-complementisers: German *wo* and *was* (dialectal, see Brandner & Bräuning 2013, Weiß 2013, Fleischer 2017)

German *dass* not a relative complementiser but a finite subordinator specified as [-rel] → it cannot occur in relative clauses or in comparatives

English *that* a proper relative complementiser with an interpretable [i-rel] feature:

- (10) I know the man **that** lives next door.

→ it types the clause as [rel] proper → no additional clause-typing layer (comparative) possible

Dutch *dat*: underspecified for [rel], can bear [u-rel] and does not type the clause as [rel] – similar to English *what*

- it is not available in relative clauses in most dialects (exceptional dialects: different status as a grammaticalised relative complementiser)
- it is available in comparatives – it licenses the higher comparative head

→ patterns in (2) follow from the general properties of *dat*

## Conclusions

role of the element *dat* in Dutch comparatives and its status in West Germanic

- English: proper [+rel] complementiser *that* not licensed
- German: [-rel] complementiser *dass* not licensed
- Dutch: underspecified *dat* licensed – triggers operator movement and allows higher CP

→ specific property of the Dutch pattern follows from the “midway” status of the element

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