Phrasal and clausal comparatives in Greek and the abstractness of syntax*

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Abstract
Greek phrasal and reduced clausal comparatives differ in that the former, but not the latter, show island sensitivities. In neither case, however, is the material that constitutes the island pronounced. This paper argues that such facts can only be captured by positing abstract unpronounced syntactic structures; the comparison between the two kinds of comparatives further shows that reducing the island effects to semantic or other ill-formedness is not possible: the island effects are irreducibly syntactic. Such facts provide support for syntactic architectures that countenance this kind of abstractness, and against surfacist syntactic theories.

Keywords
clausal comparatives, island effects, phrasal comparatives, syntax

1 Introduction

One of the recurrent leitmotifs of theorizing in many domains, including syntax, is that simple surface appearances can be misleading, and that underlying apparently simple elements or phenomena, we find complex and intricate relations and structures. This paper explores one such domain, that of comparatives, and shows that in at least one language, namely Greek, these constructions, which appear on the surface quite simple, actually make use

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of a complex syntax, subject to a process which masks their complexity and gives rise to their surface simplicity. It is argued that such an analysis is necessary to account for the facts of this construction, and that no theory or analysis which attempts to keep the syntax too simple can have a successful account of the facts. The argument itself is simple: effects which are generally believed to be due to complex syntactic dependencies, namely island sensitivities, are attested in Greek phrasal comparatives, and these island sensitivities cannot plausibly be attributed to semantic difficulties. These facts indicate that even in apparently simple phrasal comparatives, there must be syntactic movement. Two equally effective possibilities are shown to capture this: first, the phrasal comparatives may have a clausal source, subject to movement constraints and to ellipsis; or, second, the correlate of the pivot of comparison may move at an abstract level of syntactic structure. The analysis crucially relies on the availability of abstract, unpronounced syntactic structures and provides a direct argument for grammatical architectures that countenance such abstractness. Surfacist approaches cannot make the required distinctions.

2 Clausal and phrasal comparatives

Clausal comparatives are comparatives in which the complement of the marker of the standard of comparison (e.g., than in English) shows clausal syntax, consisting of all the usual elements found in a clause whose only gap is that which corresponds to the comparative operator. In English, these have the following form.

(1) Mary plays the guitar better than John plays the guitar.
(2) More people live in Russia than live in the US.
(3) In the 2000 presidential election in Florida, more people thought they voted for Gore than thought they voted for Bush.

In Greek, clausal comparatives have the same properties; note that the standard marker corresponding to English than is ap`o	i.

(4) I Maria pezi kiθara kalitera ap`oti pezi kiθara o
    the Maria.nom plays guitar better than.clausal plays guitar the
    Giannis.nom
    ‘Maria plays the guitar better than Giannis plays the guitar.’
(5) Perisoteri anθropi pisteun oti i Maria pezi kiθara
    more people think.3pl that the Maria plays guitar