

Expressing comparison in the Tai languages

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In a broad sense the comparative is a functional category exhibiting a correlation of objects in a real or imaginary world by their features: qualities, states of being, status, etc., and demonstrating their alignment on a scale of measurement. Comparison cannot be performed without the fulfillment of two prerequisites. First, there should be a basis in common; that means that objects have to be compatible, let us say, with respect to a feature of distance, size, position, etc. These features are usually represented by adjectives, certain sorts of verbs, qualitative nouns, etc. Throughout this paper such words will be called *feature words* (F).

Second, there should be at least three positions on the scale of comparison: a starting point and two or more points oriented to the starting point. If there are two or more objects endowed with a certain feature but there is no starting point then a comparison is not possible because either one of them could be taken as the point of reference. When, for instance, we set out to compare objects in respect to a certain feature, one of them, the object of comparison, is always marked as being a certain distance from zero, with the starting point as zero. In fact no feature is *a priori* attached to one definite point on the scale of measurement, but it usually represents a conventional average notion of this or that feature which is determined by the objective situation and which has been formed in the course of the acquisition of reality. For example, for villagers the word *big* in a phrase *big building* tends to be associated with one size (two or three stories), but for townspeople it tends to be associated with a different size (many stories).

In linguistics the term *comparative* is usually connected with an alignment of certain correlative forms on a graded scale or with the establishment of a paradigm of degrees of comparison. There are two types of gradation, absolute and relative, or in other terms, objective and subjective. The former reflects degrees of a feature irrespective of another object; the latter reflects degrees of the feature in relation to the same feature in another object.

Absolute gradation usually manifests itself by lexical means, and in some instances by a few derivational affixes. Tai languages¹ as a rule use only lexical-semantic means to express it. For instance, in standard Thai the feature *naaw⁵* 'cold' can be specified by means of different particles, e.g. *khɔɔn³-khaang³ naaw⁵* 'rather cold', *kiap² naaw⁵* 'almost cold', *naaw⁵ maak³* 'very cold', *naaw⁵ cat²*

¹In this paper Tai is used in a broad sense to include Tai proper, Kam-Sui, and other related languages.

Standard Thai	naaŋ ¹ -saaw ⁵ girl	nii ⁴ this	jin ³ more	suai ⁵ beautiful	
	This girl is much more beautiful.				
Lue	muu ¹ pig	to ¹ Cl	ni ⁸ this	xwen ⁴ more	pii ² fat
	This pig is much fatter.				
Buyi	zaan ² house	ti ¹ his	xən ⁶ more	moo ⁵ new	
	His house is much newer.				
Shan	nam ⁵ -mik ⁵ ink	nai ⁵ this	khən ⁴ more	lam ⁴ black	
	This ink is much blacker.				
Lungming	kii ³ -lay ⁴ who	nok ⁴ more	soŋ ¹ tall		
	Who is taller?				

The essential peculiarity of these sentences is the absence of an overt object of comparison; it is understood from the previous context but it cannot be reinstated into its natural position, so we cannot interpret this event as just an ordinary deletion. Sentences of the <S M F> pattern never start a new topic of discourse; conversely, they always follow other sentences, developing the original topic. From a discourse perspective such sentences are cataphoric. In that case a zero position after the feature word should be treated as anaphoric ellipsis with syntactic value, i.e. it implicitly represents the counterpart of the relationship in point.³

Morphemes functioning as modal particles in such sentences differ from one language to another; they include *khεεŋ⁴* (Ahom, Khamti, Phake, Shan, Lue, Laha), *jin³* (St.Thai, Lao), *hεεŋ⁴* (Lao), *laai¹* (Nung), *ham³* (Tho) *nok⁴* (Lungming) etc. All of them have the meaning 'much, more'. One of the most widely used of these is *khεεŋ⁴*, occurring in various Tai languages spoken along the northern perimeter of Indochina. It seems that this morpheme is genetically cognate with Chinese *geng* which has the same meaning 'much, more'. From ancient times down to the present this has been used in Chinese as an elative particle for displaying the greater degree of a feature without referring to someone or something within a given sentence, e.g. *jintian tianqi geng len* 'Today the weather is much colder' (lit. today weather much cold). This similarity of form, meanings, and functions could testify equally to a common origin or to borrowing. This issue

³In my material there are only a few evidences of comparative sentences of the pattern <S M F O>, as in Laha *ta³ kwe³ khi¹ khaa⁶ su⁶ bom⁶ tər³* 'A woven chair is lighter than a wooden stool' (lit. chair weave more light stool wood). Their number is so meagre that I do not find it reasonable to make them into a separate type. It is difficult to evaluate. Looked at from different perspectives it may turn out as an archaism, innovation, or merely stylistic error or gaps in linguistic competence. But we can not rule out the possibility of an ancient origin for this construction. The arrangement of the counterparts showed the elements of the comparison and their function, and the preverbal element showed the differences in degree.

should be solved against the background of historico-comparative investigations of Sino-Tai languages as a whole.

There are different definitions of these morphemes. They have usually been treated as adverbs of measure and degree, but in my opinion that is not quite correct. Unlike adverbs they always occupy the position before the verb, and they carry a meaning of subjective evaluation of a given feature rather than a relationship of comparison as such. Their modal and not relational nature will appear clearly in the objective comparative constructions discussed below. So it would be more correct to regard such morphemes as modals with residual lexical meaning. This might allow us to see these sentences as being intermediate between subjective and objective comparative sentences. They could be called anaphoric comparative sentences.⁴

Cataphoric variants of the above cited anaphoric sentences take the following patterns: <S M F Pr O> or <S Pr O M F>. These kinds of sentences occur only in the Tai languages in Assam and adjacent areas such as Khamti, Phake, Tai-Rong, and Ahom. The preposition (Pr) element is represented by such morphemes as *mai* the marker of oblique case in Khamti, *luk* the marker of Ablative in Ahom, *hang* the marker of Dative or Ablative in Phake.

Khamti	kon ³	a-nai ²	mai	kon ³	a-nan ²	khen ³	suŋ ⁴
	S		Pr	O		M	F
	man	this	than	man	that	more	tall
	This man is taller than that man.						
Phake	chaw ³	khen	phi ²	han ⁴	khom ³	san ⁴	
	S	M	F	Pr	O		
	Chaw	more	fat	than	Khomsan		
	Chaw is fatter than Khomsan						
Ahom	man	nɔŋ-man	khən	suŋ	luk	man	nɔy-yən
	S		M	F	Pr	O	
	he	brother	more	high	than	he	sister
	His brother is taller than his sister.						

These patterns in all probability have been derived from local East Indian languages, which resort to the ablative and other oblique cases in comparative constructions. It should be noted that although the syntactic functions of the nouns in such sentences are clearly established by the presence of prepositions, nonetheless the occurrence of modals is obligatory. It is probably accounted for by the fact that the opposition of direct and oblique cases marks only the relationship of comparison, while the modal element is responsible for marking the degree of the featured comparison.

⁴This construction with an M element resembles the French pattern <plus + adjective> in which the morpheme *plus* just signifies subjective estimation of a feature and does not show 'relationship' as such. The latter becomes evident only when the adjectival element in the construction is followed by the particle *que*. Cf. Tai-Tho *ham³ luon¹ qua² ving¹* and its French translation *plus grand que Ving* 'bigger than Ving'.

The most widespread types of comparative constructions include a special morpheme to mark the relationship of comparison (C). There are two varieties of such comparisons: <S F C O> or <S M F C O>. These are common for the majority of Tai languages, if not for all of them. In most cases the modal particle is optional, but in some cases, as in Ahom, Khamti, Nung, and perhaps others, it is obligatory. The C-unit is really a principal constituent of this pattern, as it controls the semantic and syntactic content of the whole proposition. The function of Comparative in various languages is performed by different morphemes having the original meaning 'to surpass, exceed, overpass'. Only a few of them have a different source. All of these are deverbatives, many of them still coexisting with their etymons. These morphemes can be treated as auxiliaries, and can be taken either as homonyms of their related verb, or as being the verb itself in a different syntactic function. The specific classification of these morphemes does not matter for this paper; it can be discussed elsewhere. The diffusion of these morphemes in the Tai area is quite uneven, their isoglosses may be unique, discontinuous, or intersecting, and several of these morphemes may occur in the same language. The greatest variability has been found in the Southeastern branch, perhaps because these languages have been better described and more profoundly investigated.

Among these morphemes the best known is *kwaa* (B2) 'to go over, surpass', which has been found in St.Thai, Lao, Phutai, Tai-Muei, Tai-Dam, Tai-Daeng, Tai-Khaw, Tho, Chuang, Buyi, Kam, Sui, Maonan, Mulao, and Li (Hlai).

St.Thai	mɛɛ ³ -nam ⁴	khɔŋ ⁵	jaaw ¹	kwaa ²	mɛɛ ³ -nam ⁴	caw ³	phra ³ -jaa ¹
	S		F	C	O		
	river	Khong	long	more	river		Chaopraya
	The Mekong is longer than the Chaopraya.						

S.Chuang	pow ⁴	nei ⁴	saan ¹	kwaa ⁵	pow ⁴	han ⁴
	S		F	C	O	
	man	this	tall	more	man	that
	This man is taller than that man.					

Phutai	həə ³	lam ³	nii ³	cop ⁵	kwaa ³	həə ³	lam ³	nan ⁵
	S			F	C	O		
	boat	Clf.	this	good	Comp.	boat	Clf.	that);
	This boat is better than that one.							

Lao	faa ³	mɛɛp ⁶	hur ⁴	kwaa ²	ɔɔk-fai ²
	S		F	C	O
	sky	flash	bright	surpass	electric bulb
	Lightning is brighter than an electric light.				

Tai-Tho	sɔŋ ¹	nɔɔi ⁵	kwaa ²	saam ¹
	S	F	C	O
	two	little	surpass	three
	Two is less than three.			

In the Kam-Sui group this morpheme appears as *taa* ⁶.

Maonan	ŋ ²	voŋ ¹	taa ⁶	fia ²
	S	F	C	O
	you	tall	surpass	I
	You are taller than I.			

In Li (Hlai) its allomorpheme is *duaa*².

Li	paa ¹	long ¹	duaa ²	miiw ²
	S	F	C	O
	dog	big	to surpass	cat
	Dogs are bigger than cats.			

There exist various definitions of these morphemes. For instance, J. Plam (1972:172) considers the morpheme *kwaa*² in St. Thai and Lao as an auxiliary particle of comparison; Vichin Panupong (1970:125) qualifies the same morpheme in St. Thai as a post-verbal auxiliary; R. Noss (1964:190) treats it as adjective modifier; Udom Warotamasikkadit looks upon it as a lexical unit. The truth seems to lie somewhere in the middle. Data from St. Thai, Lao and many other Tai languages attest that such morphemes as *kwaa* hardly belong to purely grammatical units. They still retain their lexical meaning and syntactic independence. It is particularly evident when they follow qualitative nouns or numerals.

Lao	njaam ²	pa ¹ -sop ¹	khɔ ³ -haai ⁶	man ²	joom ²	mii ²
	time	meet	misfortune	it	natural	have
	khun ² -khaa ⁴	kwaa ⁵	njam ²	pok ¹ ka ¹ ti ¹		
	value	surpass	time	ordinary		

In time of need it is naturally more valuable than in ordinary times.

St. Thai	mii ¹	ngyyn ¹	sip ²	kwaa ²	baat ²
	have	money	ten	surpass	baht
	There is more than ten baht.				

Its self-sufficiency is also corroborated by its separability from the feature word.

Lao	naan ²	ngaam ²	khyn ⁶	kwaa ⁵	kaw ⁵	iik ⁵
	she	beautiful	rise	surpass	before	more.
	She became more beautiful than before.					

However, one must acknowledge that constant reiteration of this morpheme in standard comparative constructions would undoubtedly make it lose lexical meaning and acquire features of a marker of relationship, or would undergo grammaticalization to some degree.

In all probability this type of comparative construction has some connection with the Chinese language, particularly with Cantonese. It is rather explicitly attested by their substantial and structural similarity. Note St. Thai *mai*⁴-*sak*² *kheeng*¹ *kwaa*² *mai*³-*phai*² 'Teak is stronger than bamboo', St. Chinese (*tamen de shili*) *da guo renming de keming shili* '(Their forces) surpassed (lit.big surpass) the peoples revolutionary forces' (Yuwen xuexi 1953:8:22), and Cantonese ...*kow*

kwo tsyngsin saang ‘...taller than Mr. Zang (Yankiver 1987:68). The Chinese morpheme *guo/gwo* (etymol. ‘to go across, to surpass’) belongs among the most ancient lexical units of Chinese. It has been used for conveying the idea of comparison since the early times. For instance, it occurs in Lungyu (6th cent. B.C.): *yu yie hao yun kwo wo* ‘Yu was braver than I’ (lit. Yu Predic. good brave surpass I). But such usage of the morpheme *guo/gwo* was not characteristic for ancient Chinese. For this purpose the ablative preposition *yu* had been usually used, occupying the position between adjectival verb and the noun. Approximately since the second millennium the main means for exhibiting comparison in Chinese has been the construction <S compared-with O V>. As far as I know only in Cantonese does the construction with *gwo* still serve as an ordinary means for displaying comparison. So there are grounds for inferring that the Tai morpheme *kwaal/kaal/taa* was originally borrowed from Chinese, unless comprehensive historical investigations repudiate this supposition and prove a common origin for Chinese *gwo* and Tai *kwaal*.

A number of Tai languages use other morphemes than *kwaal* for displaying comparison. But their feature in common is that all of them also bear the original meaning ‘to surpass, etc’ and occupy the same position in the syntactic structure. Most well known among them are: *lyyn*⁴ ‘to surpass, exceed’ in Lao, Tai-Muei, Tai-Yang, Saek; *nya*¹/*lya*¹/*ləə*¹ ‘to be superior, above/over’ in Lue, Shan, Tai-Yang, Tai-Rong; *sya*¹, which looks like a phonetic variant of the former, in Laha; *kaai*¹ ‘to go across’ in Tai-Yang; *nan*⁴ ‘to surpass, to exceed’ in one of the dialects of Buyi; *njiu*² ‘to go across’ in the Quiba dialect of the Sha language; *hən* ‘to exceed’, which was borrowed by Nung from Vietnamese.

The behaviour of these morphemes can be seen in the following sentences:

Tai-Muey	nam ²	nii ⁵	vai ³	lyyn ⁵	nam ³ -khong ¹
	river	this	swift	surpass	Mekong
	The current in this river is swifter than in the Mekong.				

Tai-Yang	myy ⁶ -nii ⁶	naaw ¹	ləə ¹	myy ⁶ -waa ⁴
	today	cold	above	yesterday
	Today the weather is colder than yesterday.			

Lue	tan ⁵	hang ⁵	ləə ¹	ɸɔɔ ⁵ -mɛɛ ⁵
	he	rich	above	parents
	He is richer than his parents.			

Laha	lən ²	zen ⁶	kwaang ²	sya	lən ²	e ⁶
	house	I	wide	superior	house	you
	My house is wider than yours.					

Buyi	faa ²	man ⁶	nan ⁴	naam ⁶
	metal	strong	surpass	ceramics
	Metal is stronger than ceramics.			

Sha	tə-bee ⁴	sai ¹	njiu ²	tə-məw ¹
	sheep	clean	surpass	pig
	Sheep are cleaner than pigs.			

As seen in the above cited examples, the dominant cognitive basis for making a comparison is often the notion of the superiority of one object over another with regard to a certain feature. However, in some other Tai languages the dominant cognitive basis for a comparison is the notion of separation, rejection, or repudiation of the object of comparison. This notion exists in many languages of the world, i.e. the notion that the object of comparison goes apart, moves away from the subject of comparison. It is attested by the usage of ablative case for the object of comparison in a good number of inflectional languages. In some Tai languages for this purpose they use the morpheme *se*¹, which has the etymological meaning 'to separate, lose, be separated, be lost'. This morpheme occurs in S. and N. Shan, Nora, Khuen, and White Tai.

S. Shan	man ⁴	li ⁴ -ngaam ⁴	se ¹	saaw ¹	tai ⁴
	she	beautiful	separated	girl	Tai
	She is more beautiful than Tai girls.				

White Tai	mak ² -təng ¹	waan ¹	se ¹	mak ² -kəng ¹
	melon	sweet	separated	pineapple
	Melons are sweeter than pineapples.			

N.Shan (Dehun)	man ² kai ⁴	si ¹	kaw ⁶
	he	dexterous	separated I
	He is more dexterous than I.		

As was mentioned before, some Tai languages prefer to use a contaminated discontiguous construction including both M and C elements.

Khamti	khen ³	sung ⁴	lym-shi	a-nan ²
	muchM	high	comp.C	that
	much higher than that			

Nung	can ¹	laai ¹	hεəng ³	hən ⁵	myng ³
	I	muchM	strong	surpassC	you
	I am much stronger than you.				

Laha	kən ¹	kwaang ²	sya ¹	lon ²	e ⁶
	muchM	wide	aboveC	house	that
	much wider than that house				

It seems that in most events the M element should be considered desirable rather than obligatory or optional. Its occurrence depends on the intention of the speaker to emphasize the difference of degree, not on the necessity to display a comparison as such. The latter, as has been said, realizes itself by means of morphemes specialized for this function.

The S and O positions in comparative constructions can be filled by different parts of speech. Not only objects, whether real or imaginary, but also actions, states, events, etc., are able to come into a relationship of comparison. When the object of comparison is either an indefinite pronoun, or a word designating collective plurality, or a phrase with generalizing meaning, the construction in question acquires the syntactic meaning of superlative.

Lue	la ¹ -du ¹ season	hɔn ⁴ hot	lə ¹ Comp.	pən ⁵ other		
	The summer was extremely hot.					
Lao	suk ¹ ripe	kwaa ⁵ Comp.	muu ⁵ group			
	riper than the rest					
Tai-Yang	phɛɛng ⁴ expensive	kaai ¹ Comp.	phəə whoever			
	most expensive					
Phutai	cop ⁵ good	kwaa ³ Comp.	mət ⁵ all	muu ³ group		
	best of all					
Laha	kwaang ² wide	səa ¹ Comp.	məi ⁶ every			
	widest of all					
Tai-Tho	dia ⁵ Dia	luong ¹ big	qua ² Comp.	moi ⁴ every	can ⁵ person	
	Dia is taller than everybody.					
Lao	baang ² some	khon ² person	mya ⁶ when	maw ² drunk	lɛɛw ³ -kɔ ⁵ then	yai ⁵ big
	kwaa ⁵ surpass	baan ³ village	kwaa ⁵ surpass	myang ² town		
	Some people when drunk think themselves the greatest in the world. ⁵					

There are only a few Tai languages that have a special morpheme to express superlative degree, e.g. St. Thai *thii³-sut²* 'most', derived from the noun phrase *thii³-sut²* 'end' (lit. place finish); Laha *nget⁴* derived from the numeral 'one, first'.

St. Thai yai² thii³-sut² 'biggest'

Laha kwaang¹ nget⁴ 'widest'

Their syntactic features, i.e. position and function, are the same as adverbs in these languages. So the above at least attests to the absence of a basic superlative degree in Tai languages.

Thus the relationship of comparison in Tai languages is largely manifested by the following six syntactic constructions:

⁵The words *baan³* 'village' and *myang²* 'town' here are used metaphorically with the meaning 'all the people in the country or in the world'; the repetition of the morpheme *kwaa²* before each word testifies once more to its lexical rather than grammatical nature.

1. S F O
2. S M F

3. S F C O
4. S M F C O

5. S M F Pr O
6. S Pr O M F

Of these the third and the fourth are standard and widely used, the first is restricted lexically, the second is anaphoric, and the fifth and the sixth are local, i.e. they occur only in some areas under the influence of alien languages.

For the greater part of the Tai languages the relationship of comparison is bound up with the concept of superiority of one object over another with respect to a given feature. This phenomenon is intrinsic not only for Tai but also for many other languages of Indochina, including Mon-Khmer, Viet-Muong, and southern Chinese dialects. In other words, it is an areal feature. For a smaller number of Tai languages the relationship of comparison is associated with the concepts of separation, alienation, or moving away that distinguish Tai and Austroasiatic languages from the adjacent Austronesian, Tibeto-Burman and Modern St. Chinese languages.

Data from Tai languages demonstrate a great variety of forms and means for displaying comparison. This attests to a rather recent adoption of the overt surface forms for exhibiting the cognitive category of comparison. And the adoption has taken place separately for each language or group of languages.

The above seems to give enough grounds to posit that Tai languages still lack a grammatical category for comparison as it is understood in general linguistics, that is, as a paradigm of regular obligatory formal oppositions. Instead there are only first signs that claim the right to become formal marks of that category. Future development will show whether these elements match such a definition or not.

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