

Conjoined comparatives in Warlpiri

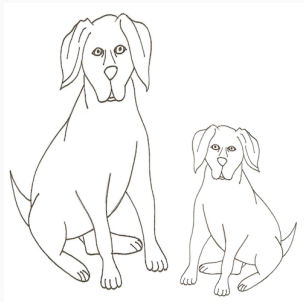
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Global Australian Languages Workshop 1

Background

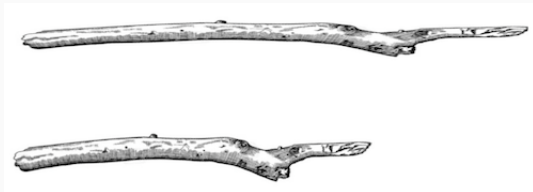
- Stassen (1985, 2013); Ultan (1972): Languages vary in the morphosyntax that they use to express comparatives, like English *Ruth is taller than Leah*.
- **Warlpiri** (Ngumpin-Yapa; Pama-Nyungan), like many other Australian languages, can use **conjoined comparatives** to express comparison.
- Conjoined comparatives typically take the form of two contrasting, positive (unmodified) predications (Bochnak 2015; Bowler 2016).

Conjoined comparatives in Warlpiri



- (1) Nyampu jarntu wiri, nyampu jarntu wita.
this dog big this dog small
'This dog is bigger than that dog.'
(Lit. 'This dog is big, this dog is small.')

Conjoined comparatives in Warlpiri



- (2) Nyampu watiya wiri, nyampu=ju rdangkarlpa watiya.
this stick big this=TOP short stick
'This stick is longer than that stick.'
(Lit. 'This stick is big, this stick is short.')

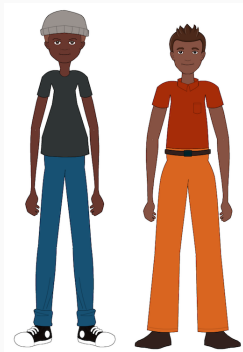
The puzzle

- Warlpiri conjoined comparatives are interpreted differently in some contexts from how semantic theories predict that they should be (Bowler 2020). These are:
 - Crisp judgment contexts
 - (Lack of) entailment to the positive degree contexts
- Warlpiri conjoined comparatives differ in this respect from conjoined comparatives in other languages (Bochnak 2015 for Washo, a linguistic isolate in the US).

- Does your language have conjoined comparatives?
- Do you know if its conjoined comparatives are interpreted like in Warlpiri, or not?
- Please contact me if you have data you would be willing to share, or if you just want to learn more about comparison and why it is so interesting! [margitbowler at gmail dot com]

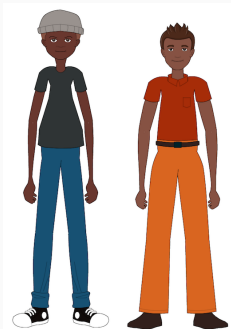
Conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts

- **Crisp judgment contexts** are contexts in which the compared individuals differ only a very small amount with respect to the relevant property.



Conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts

- Conjoined comparatives are predicted to be bad in these contexts, because neither individual “stands out” enough to license unmodified uses of the gradable predicates (Graff 2000; Kennedy 2007ab, 2011).



(3) #John is tall, Bill is short.

(4) ✓ John is taller than Bill. (*explicit comparison*)

Conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts

- However, Warlpiri conjoined comparatives are produced and accepted in crisp judgment contexts.



- (5) Nyampu watiya wirijarlu, wita nyampu=ju.
this tree big small this=TOP
'This tree is bigger than that tree.'
(Lit. 'This tree is big, this one is small.')

Conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts



- (6) Nyampu piri wantiki, nyampu wuurnpa.
this stone wide this narrow
'This stone is wider than that one.'
(Lit. 'This stone is wide, this one is narrow.')

Conjoined comparatives in entailment to the positive degree contexts (EPDCs)

- EPDCs are contexts in which both objects {hold/do not hold} the property with respect to which they are being compared.
- (7) Context: Liddy and Judy are different heights, and they are both short women (under 5ft/1.5m).

Conjoined comparatives in entailment to the positive degree contexts (EPDCs)

- Conjoined comparatives are predicted to be bad in EPDCs because one of the two conjuncts should be judged false (Bochnak 2015).
- (8) Context: Liddy and Judy are different heights, and they are both short women (under 5ft/1.5m).
- a. #Liddy is tall, Judy is short.
 - b. ✓Liddy is taller than Judy. (*explicit comparison*)
- (8-a) is reported to be unacceptable because (English) speakers judge that *Liddy is tall* is false in this context in which neither Liddy nor Judy count as ‘tall’ in a general sense.

Conjoined comparatives in entailment to the positive degree contexts (EPDCs)

- Contrary to our expectations, Warlpiri conjoined comparatives are produced and accepted in EPDCs.

(9) Context: Liddy and Judy are different heights, and they are both short women (under 5 feet/1.5m).

Liddy=ji kirrirdimpayi, Judy ngula=ju rdangkarlpa.

Liddy=TOP tall Judy that=TOP short

‘Liddy is taller than Judy.’

(Lit. ‘Liddy is tall, Judy is short.’)

Conjoined comparatives in entailment to the positive degree contexts (EPDCs)

- (10) Context: Melbourne and Sydney are both big cities, and are of different sizes.

Melbourne=*ju yukanti*, Sydney=*ji wirijarlu*.

Melbourne=*TOP small* Sydney=*TOP big*

‘Melbourne is smaller than Sydney.’

(Lit. ‘Melbourne is small, Sydney is big.’)

Cross-linguistic variation in conjoined comparatives

- Interestingly, availability in crisp judgment contexts (CJCs) and EPDCs seems to correlate together as a point of cross-linguistic variation among languages with conjoined comparatives.
- Washo conjoined comparatives behave as predicted by theories of vague predicates (Bochnak 2013, 2015), but Warlpiri conjoined comparatives don't.

	CJCs	EPDCs
Warlpiri	✓	✓
Samoa ¹	✓ [?]	✓
Patpatar ²	?	✓
Washo	#	#
Motu ³	#	#

¹Marsack (1975); Vera Hohaus, p.c.

²Peekel (1909)

³Villalta (2007)

- This observed variation is relevant for our understanding of vague gradable predicates cross-linguistically; it suggests that not all positive vague predications are equal.
- Differences are found even between languages that have the same settings of certain semantic parameters: Warlpiri and Washo both have negative settings of the Beck et al. (2009) Degree Semantics Parameter (Bochnak 2015, Bowler 2016), yet their conjoined comparatives differ semantically.

Cross-linguistic variation in conjoined comparatives

- We don't know very much about the semantics of languages with conjoined comparatives, in general.
 - Beck, et al. (2009): Motu (Austronesian; PNG)
 - Bochnak (2013, 2015): Washo (isolate; USA)
 - Bowler (2016, 2020): Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan; Australia)
 - Reisinger & Lo (2017): ʔayʔajuθəm (Central Salish; Canada)
 - Reisinger (2018): Ktunaxa (isolate; USA and Canada)
 - Kapitonov (2019): Kunbarlang (Gunwinyguan; Australia)
- Of these studies, only Bochnak & Bowler explicitly address the availability of conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts and EPDCs.
- **Do you have data to share?**

Analysis

- My analysis of the Warlpiri data (Bowler 2020) builds off of Bittner & Hale's (1995) proposal that Warlpiri has phonologically null definiteness marking.
- Warlpiri property concept words like *wiri* 'big' are nouns, and as nouns, can be interpreted definitely.

$$(11) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } \llbracket \text{big}_{\text{Warlpiri}} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. \text{big}(x) \text{ in } c \\ \text{b. } \llbracket \text{the big}_{\text{Warlpiri}} \rrbracket^c = \iota x[\text{big}(x) \text{ in } c] \end{array}$$

$$(12) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } \llbracket \text{child}_{\text{W/Eng}} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \text{child}(x) \\ \text{b. } \llbracket \text{the child}_{\text{W/Eng}} \rrbracket = \iota x[\text{child}(x)] \end{array}$$

- (11-b) is defined iff the presuppositions of the iota operator are satisfied, those being that x is the unique big individual in the context c .

- Warlpiri conjoined comparatives can be interpreted as conjunctions of two definite descriptions.
- The presuppositions of the iota operators require that there be only one individual in the extensions of each of the property concepts.
- This shrinks the context to just the two objects being compared.

- Furthermore, gradable predicates (GPs) like *big*, *tall*, etc. are crosslinguistically subject to the **Informativity Constraint** (Klein 1980, Kennedy 2011).
- Informativity Constraint: If something is asserted to be G in a context, there must be something else in the context that is $\neg G$.
- Given a context containing just two objects, if one is asserted to be G, the other **must** be $\neg G$, by Informativity.



- (13) Nyampu watiya wirijarlu, wita nyampu=ju.
this tree big small this=TOP
'This tree is bigger than that tree.'
(Lit. 'This tree is **the big one**, this one is **the small one**.')
- (14) $\llbracket (13) \rrbracket^c = 1$ iff
this tree = $\iota x[\text{big}(x) \text{ in } c] \wedge$ this tree = $\iota y[\text{small}(y) \text{ in } c]$

- (15) Context: Liddy and Judy are different heights, and they are both short women (under 5 feet/1.5m).

Liddy=ji kirrirdimpayi, Judy ngula=ju rdangkarlpa.

Liddy=TOP tall Judy that=TOP short

‘Liddy is taller than Judy.’

(Lit. ‘Liddy is **the tall one**, Judy is **the short one**.’)

- (16) $\llbracket(15)\rrbracket^c = 1$ iff $L = \iota x[\text{tall}(x) \text{ in } c] \wedge J = \iota y[\text{short}(y) \text{ in } c]$

Why are Warlpiri conjoined comparatives assertable at all in CJC/EPDCs?



This tree is the big one is supposedly marked in English in this CJC;
This tree is the bigger one is preferred.

- Warlpiri does not have any explicit comparative marking like English *-er* (Bowler 2016), so pragmatic competition between ‘the big one’ and ‘the bigger one’ does not arise.
- Perhaps the Similarity Constraint on GPs (Kennedy 2011, van Rooij 2011) is ranked lower in Warlpiri than in English.
- I suspect that definite descriptions are more acceptable in English in CJs/EPDCs than the theoretical literature assumes; experimental work is needed to test this.

Thank you!

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