

Degree constructions in Seri

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1 Introduction

- Seri (*cmiiique iitom*) is a language isolate
- Seri is spoken in two villages: *Haxöl Iihom/El Desemboque* and *Socaaix/Punta Chueca*
- Approximately 900 people (Ethnologue 2007)
- Published materials: grammatical description (Marlett, 2016), dictionary (Moser and Marlett, 2010) + many papers and texts



Figure 1.1: Seri in Mexico

Languages have been argued to differ in how their gradable predicates (i.e. *tall*, *big*, ...) are best analyzed based on a series of diagnostics proposed in that literature.

Two families of analyses of gradable predicates cross-linguistically:

- *the scalar analysis* according to which gradable predicates have a degree argument, and $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket^c = \lambda d. \lambda x. x \text{ is tall to degree } d$
- *the vague predicate analysis* according to which no degree variable is involved. $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. x \text{ counts as tall with respect to context } c$

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What strategies does Seri use in degree constructions? Do Seri gradable predicates involve degrees?

Beck et al. (2009) and Bochnak (2015) propose that variation in what types of gradable predicates languages have can explain further properties of gradable predicate constructions in these languages:

- a language's gradable predicates have a degree argument \leftrightarrow the language will have degree morphology that can manipulate this degree variable (e.g. the language is expected to have explicit comparatives, a comparative marker on the gradable predicate)
- a language's gradable predicates do not have a degree argument \leftrightarrow no specific degree morphology in the language (e.g. the language is expected to have implicit comparatives, no comparative marker on gradable predicate)

Seri falls somewhere in between the two types: some constructions have degree morphology (e.g. measure phrases), other do not (e.g. superiority comparatives)

In these ten minutes, we'll present the results of some of these diagnostics applied to positive and superiority comparative constructions in Seri.

2 Background: positive constructions and superiority comparatives

2.1 Positive constructions

Concepts expressed by adjectives in languages like English correspond to intransitive stative predicates in Seri (as in Washo; Bochnak 2015).

- (1) a. Juan quih yoocösxaj.
Juan DEF RLYO.long
Juan is tall.
- b. Juan quih xoocösxaj.
Juan DEF INTENS.long
Juan is very/reall tall.

Note (1) where gradable predicates can combine directly with the intensifier prefix *x-*.

Seri has about 8 adjectives (excluding demonstratives), they cannot be used predicatively: *ihmaa* other, *tazo* one, *áa* true, *aapa* strong, sturdy, *íi* first, *xahxaii* kind of like, *xàpi* any, *zaac* small (Marlett 2016:598).

Nominalized verbal predicates are used in predicative and attributive positions.

- (2) a. *Minol cop zaac iha.
2.POSS:finger DEF small DCL
Int. Your finger is small. (Marlett, 2016, 599)
- b. Canoa com quisil iha.
boat DEF SBJ.NMLZ:be_small DCL
The boat is small. (Marlett, 2016, 597)

Note that the underived adjectives in Seri do not correspond to the property concepts – e.g. dimension, physical properties, color – commonly associated with the adjective category cross-linguistically according to Dixon (1982).

2.2 Comparatives

2.2.1 Morphosyntax

At first sight, Seri has implicit comparatives (as opposed to explicit; Kennedy 2007): there is no comparative marking on the predicate providing the scale of comparison.

- (3) [Juan quih]_{associate} yoocösxaj,
Juan DEF RLYO.long
[[Oscar quih]_{standard} iiqui cöhiin hac].
Oscar DEF 3.POSS:towards 3IO:3POSS:OBL.NMLZ.approach DEF.LOC
Juan is taller than Oscar (lit. Juan_i is tall, when he_i approaches Oscar).

Comparatives are marked by the expression *iiqui cöhiin hac* ‘with respect to’ introducing the standard to the simple positive sentence (2), as in (3).

The standard-marking expression shows person agreement with both the standard and the associate in the main clause (*cf* 3 and 4):

- possessive/agent morphology co-indexes the associate for person
- indirect object morphology co-indexes the standard for person

- (4) [He]_{associate} hpyoocösxaj, [(me)]_{standard} iiqui me-h-ihiiin
 1sg 1SG.INTR:RLYO.long 2 3.POSS:towards 2IO-1.POSS-OBL.NMLZ.approach
 hac.
 DEF.LOC
I am taller than you.

Nominal comparatives are formed by adjoining the standard to an independent sentence where the compared noun is obligatorily quantified by *anxö* ‘many/much’ (5).

- (5) Juan quih hapaspoj hanoocaj quih anxö iyaaspoj, [(he)] iiqui
 Juan DET book(s) DET many 3;3.RLYO.write 1SG 3.POSS:towards
he-ihiiin hac].
 1IO:3POSS:OBL.NMLZ.approach DEF.LOC
Juan wrote more books than me (lit. Juan_i wrote many books, when he_i approaches me).

2.2.2 Phrasal, not clausal comparatives

The standard introduced by *iiqui cöihiiin hac* ‘with respect to’ is necessarily nominal: DPs (5, 3), nominalized clauses (6)

- (6) Juan quih hapaspoj hanoocaj quih anxö iyaaspoj, [he hapaspoj hanoocaj quih
 Juan DET book(s) DET many 3;3.RLYO.write 1SG book(s) DET
 cöhihaasipl hac iiqui cö-ihiiin hac].
 3IO:1.POSS:OBL.NMLZ:write DET 3.POSS:towards 3IO:3POSS:OBL.NMLZ.approach DEF.LOC
Juan wrote more books than I did (lit. wrt my writing the books).

Simple phrasal standards as in (5) are not derived by ellipsis from a nominalized clausal standard like (6): the agreement properties of both constructions are clearly different:

- with a nominalized clausal standard (6), indirect object morphology is 3IO – plausibly default agreement with the nominalization –,
- with phrasal standards (5), indirect object morphology is 1IO – agreement is with the standard (*he* ‘1SG’).

3 Testing reference to degrees in Seri degree constructions

3.1 Crisp judgments

Languages with implicit comparison like Washo (Bochnak, 2015, 7) do not allow crisp judgment—i.e. judgments where two entities differ only slightly in the amount to which they hold a property.

- (7) *Context:* comparing two ladders, where one is only slightly taller than the other.

#wí:diʔ	ʔitmáŋa	delkáykayiʔ		k'éʔi		wí:diʔ
wi:diʔ	ʔitmaŋa	de-ʔil-kaykay-iʔ		k'eʔ-i		wi:diʔ
this	ladder	NMLZ-ATTR-tall-ATTR		3-COP-IPFV		this
	delkáykayiʔ	é:s		k'áʔaš		
	de-ʔil-kaykay-iʔ	e:s		k'eʔ-aʔ-š		
	NMLZ-ATTR-tall-ATTR-NEG			3-COP-AOR-SR		

Intended: ‘This ladder is taller than that one.’

(Literally: ‘This ladder is tall, that one is not tall.’)

If Seri indeed has implicit comparison, it should behave like Washo.

Seri comparatives however allow crisp judgments, as the difference between 1.95m and 1.94m is small.

- (8) *Context:* Juan is 1.95m and his brother Oscar is 1.94m.

Juan	quih	yoocösxaj,	[Oscar	quih	iiqui	cöihiin
Juan	DEF	RLYO:long	Oscar	DEF	3.POSS:towards	3IO:3POSS:OBL.NMLZ.approach
	hac]	<i>standard</i> .				
	DEF.LOC					

Juan is taller than Oscar (lit. Juan is tall, with respect to Oscar).

3.2 Measure phrases

Seri has measure phrases for predicates like *tall* introduced by the adposition *iti* coindexed as an oblique by the morpheme *cö-* ‘3IO’ on the verb (9).

- (9) Raquel quih 1.70m iti cöyoocösxaj.
 Raquel DEF 1.70 [3POSS]in 3IO:RLYO:long
Raquel is 1.70m tall.

However, measure phrases are not allowed in comparatives (10).

- (10) #Raquel quih 2cm iti cöyoocösxaj, [Debora quih iiqui
 Raquel DEF 2cm [3POSS]in 3IO:RLYO:long Debora DEF 3.POSS:towards
 cöihiin hac].
 3IO:3POSS:OBL.NMLZ.approach DEF.LOC

Int. Raquel is 2cm taller than Debora. SC: no one measures just 2cm (cf. Raquel is 2cm tall when she approaches Debora)

In English (and other languages e.g. Japanese (Beck et al., 2009)), comparatives allow measure phrases even where the non-comparative counterpart does not.

- (11) a. *This book is 10 pounds expensive.
 b. This book is 10 pounds more expensive.

One possible interpretation of this is that that the exact measure phrase of the positive is not a complement of the predicate but an oblique adjunct comparable to *at 1.70m* in *Raquel is tall at 1.70m*.

To generalize the test of measure phrases to a language it is therefore necessary to first establish criteria to distinguish between the two options (argument vs adjunct)

3.3 Degree questions

Seri also has degree questions where the *wh*-word *zó* ‘how’ is supplemented by the particle *xah*, yielding an approximate quantity question (Marlett 2016:146, ex 188/189).

- (12) ¿Juan quih zó xah tacösxaj?
 Juan DEF how ATTEN RLT.long
How tall is Juan?

Degree questions can also be formed from comparative constructions (13),

- (13) ¿Juan quih zó xah tacösxaj, Gabriel quih iiqui cöihiin
 Juan DET how ATTEN RLT.be_tall Gabriel DET 3.POSS:towards 3IO:3POSS:OBL.NMLZ.approach
 hac?
 DEF.LOC

How much taller than Gabriel is Juan? (lit. How tall is Juan when he approaches Gabriel?)

Note that the answer to such a question involves a construction with a verb meaning *exceed* (difference comparatives are not possible, see above).

- (14) 8cm ih cöiyooix.
 8cm FOC 3IO.3>3.RLYO.exceed
(Gabriel is) 8cm taller (than Juan).

4 Conclusion

Current available tests in the literature – designed to tell whether a language has degrees or not, which in turn should explain what degree constructionsthe language uses – do not align:

- implicit comparative construction, unacceptability of measure phrases in comparatives indicate vague predicate analysis
- crisp judgments, degree questions, measure phrases in positive constructions indicate scalar predicate analysis

As pointed out in Deal and Hohaus 2019, the correlation between the type of comparative in a language and the representation of gradable predicates is not one-to-one but influenced by other factors such as the type of comparative marker and the lexical availability of degree-wh-words.

Our work on degree constructions in Seri (sei, isolate, Mexico) supports this conclusion as Seri does not behave in a homogeneous way with respect to these diagnostics.

In particular, it is possible that Seri has scalar gradable predicates but its lexicon just lacks a comparative operator that can manipulate them.

For further work, we want to give an analysis of Seri degree constructions that derives their properties, especially as compared to other languages.

	no marker		standard marker	
	Washo	Warlpiri	Nez Perce	Seri
comp. differential	-	-	-	-
measure phrase	-	-	-	+
degree question	-	-	+	+
crisp judgment	-	+	+	+

Table 4.1: Properties of degree constructions in a few languages

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