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Indirect comparison in Ethiopian Afroasiatic languages: Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyze the linguistic features of indirect comparison in three Ethiopian languages: Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta, drawing on the frameworks of Kennedy (2007) and Bochnak (2013). This study adopts a qualitative research design to undertake a comparative investigation of indirect comparative constructions in Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta. The primary linguistic data for this investigation were obtained directly from native speakers. In the case of Oromo, informants were recruited from two males and a female degree students. For Wolaytta, a male degree student and a male speaker who lives in the Wolaytta region, supplemented by a female instructor at Wolaytta Sodo University. The study applies three diagnostics: crisp judgment contexts, compatibility with absolute standards, and the use of measure phrases, to differentiate it from direct comparison. Results show that indirect comparisons are vague and context-sensitive, failing in crisp judgment contexts and with absolute or measured standards. Direct comparisons, which use a dedicated comparative morpheme, avoid these issues by requiring only a non-zero difference between entities. Moreover, this article has discussed that cleft comparisons operate as indirect and pragmatically motivated strategies, in which the standard of comparison is implied by context rather than explicitly expressed in the syntactic structure. Data from all three languages consistently support this semantic distinction, confirming its cross-linguistic validity.

Keywords comparative constructions, indirect comparison, gradable adjectives, degree semantics, Amharic, Oromo, Wolaytta

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1. Introduction

Comparison is an intrinsic and fundamental part of the human experience, permeating spiritual, economic, and social spheres. Spiritually, individuals may explore and contrast different religious doctrines before committing to a faith, (even though many inherit their parents God). Economically, consumers meticulously evaluate products based on a multitude of factors like cost, quality, and utility before making a purchase. Socially, this comparative analysis applies to relationships, including the selection of friends and marriage partners, as well as recreational choices like sports and games.

1.1. Background of the study

Stassen (1985: 24) defines a comparative construction in language based on semantic criteria, stating that it must serve the function of positioning two objects at different points on a graded scale. In other words, a structure qualifies as comparative if it expresses that one entity ranks higher or lower than another in a measurable property. Bochnak (2013: 28–29) elaborates that this definition is semantic rather than syntactic, meaning it applies universally across languages regardless of the specific grammatical forms used to express comparison. Comparative constructions take into account that things or individuals are compared based on their different properties. Such comparisons form two classes of comparisons: indirect (implicit) and direct (explicit), comparison.

However, this article has tried to describe the indirect comparison in Ethiopian Afroasiatic languages: Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta.

Amharic belongs to the Semitic language family and central transversal south Ethiopic group in Afroasiatic language phylum (Greenberg 1966, Leslau 1995). The history of Amharic has not been well understood by linguists. However, there is a document that it was called 'language of the king' (lɨssanə nɨgus) in the 13th century, for it has served (and is serving) as a lingua franca by having the status of an official language of the country. Hence, Amharic has had the opportunity to spread widely throughout the Empire as a language of government. Recently it is the second most widely spoken Semitic language, next to Arabic (Girma 2001).

Oromo is spoken in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, and in parts of Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania, outside Ethiopia. The language is considered the third most widely spoken Afroasiatic language next to Arabic and Hausa, and the second most widely used indigenous mother tongue in Africa (Bulcha, 1994). The Ethiopian Cushitic languages are grouped into West, Central, Northern, Southern, Southeast and Eastern dialects (Feda 2015:6).

Wolaytta belongs to the Omotic family of Ometo language group. The language is spoken in Wolaytta zone of the South Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional States (SNNPRS) of Ethiopia.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

A basic component of human perception, learning and reasoning is the power of setting up of ordering among things and or objects, and making comparison between them. The variation of languages in their morphosyntax

leads to certain semantic distinctions among the languages. Even speakers of languages that lack measure phrases or numerals are able to make gradable comparison about objects. Thus, gradable concepts are expressed by the syntactic categories that every language has. For this fact, all languages have comparative constructions. These constructions are used to express ordering between two things, based on the degree or amount they possess (Sapir 1944:93-4). Semantics of comparison refers to the ways of looking at things, events, objects, etc. to determine how they are the same or different (Bochnak 2013).

The comparatives of many of the world's languages are based on specialized morphology and syntax. For instance, English uses the morphemes more/-er, most/ -est, less and as, specifically for establishing ordering of superiority, inferiority and equality, respectively; and, than and as identify the standard against which a thing is compared as in following examples:

(1) 1. Symour is a tall boy.
2. Esme is quite a beautiful girl.
3. Symour is as intelligent as Esme is.
4. Symour is taller than Lam is.
5. Pat is the tallest boy of the three. (Bale 2006:7-8)

The basic reason why I wanted to conduct this study is to contribute to the existing studies on the languages in the semantics aspect of linguistic area.

Afroasiatic is a large phylum which comprises 340 million speakers, over 375 living languages and six language families (Frajzyngier and Shay 2012). So, including the language families, which are spoken out of Ethiopia to this level of study, will be vast and unmanageable for me. Thus, I need to narrow the research area to the Afroasiatic languages spoken in Ethiopia, in which about sixty languages are incorporated. Among the languages in each family (Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic), Amharic, Oromo and Wolaytta are the top languages in number of speakers, respectively (Office of Population and Housing Census Commission 2012). Moreover, the languages have strong contact to the neighboring languages, for instance, Amharic to Tigrinya, Argobba, and to the several Gurage languages as well as to the Cushitic languages, such as Oromo and Agaw languages. Oromo is also related to the other Cushitic languages as well as to the Semitic and Omotic languages in several ways. The same is true to Wolaytta that it is strongly related to the other Omotic languages, such as Gamo, Gofa, Dawro and to the neighboring languages (Wakasa 2014:32). Hence, I have a firm conviction that these languages can be representatives for the other languages in their families.

There are several studies on the grammar of the languages. However, there are broad gaps on the semantics aspect of the languages, specially, on the semantics of comparison. So, I decided to conduct this research to provide my own contribution on the semantics of comparison.

1.3. Research Question

The research had the following two significant questions:

1. What are the strategies used by the languages to express indirect comparison?
2. What are the variations and similarities of stategies in the expressions of comparing things indirectly in Amharic, Oromo and Wolaytta?

1.4. Hypothesis

Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta, as the languages belonging to the same phylum, are expected to exhibit similarities in the semantic strategies of indirect comparison; however, due to their classification into different language families, they will also show significant structural and semantic differences in how indirect comparison is expressed.

The objective of this study is to investigate how the indirect comparisons are expressed in Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta.

1.5. Literature review

Stassen (1985:24) defines a comparative construction as a linguistic structure that ranks two entities along a gradable dimension and signals an inequality between them. Bochnak (2013:28–29) further clarifies that this definition is semantically grounded and thus independent of the particular morphosyntactic realization a language may employ. In other words, what unifies comparative constructions cross-linguistically is their meaning, not their structural form. For example, the following English sentences each encode a comparison between John and Luke, despite utilizing distinct syntactic strategies.

(2) a. John is heavier than Luke.
b. John exceeds Luke in weight.
c. John's weight is greater than Luke's.
d. John is heavy compared to Luke.
e. John is heavy next to Luke.
f. John is heavy, but Luke isn't very heavy.
g. Between John and Luke, John is the heavy one.

Each of these sentences is in some sense comparative in that we can derive that John is ordered above Luke on a scale of weight. Moreover, we would consider as a comparative construction under the definition provided above.

A comparison that shows a relation of sequential arrangement (less, or greater than) between two things or individuals, (let us say Sisay and Lemma), with respect to some measurement scale such as height, which can be expressed as:

Sisay > Height Lemma ⇔ Height (Sisay) > Height (Lemma), (Hohaus and Bochnak 2019:236).

Direct comparison denotes comparatives that make use of dedicated comparative morphology; for instance, the synthetic –er or the analytic more in English (Hanink 2020:256). According to Kennedy (2007: 16), direct (explicit) comparatives demonstrate a sequential arrangement between

objects x and y with respect to gradable property g using a morphosyntactic form whose conventional meaning has the consequence that the degree to which x is g exceeds the degree to which y is g.

Indirect comparison denotes constructions in which no dedicated comparative morphology is used to give rise to a comparative meaning, and no comparative morphology is employed as the examples of the following form in English:

(3) 'Compared to John, Luke is tall'.

Cross-linguistically, it is often found in the form of conjoined comparative which are formulated such that some property is 'true of x and false of y' (Kennedy, 2007: 17).

Bale (2006:57) explains that direct comparisons are a little complicated and associated with linguistically external measurement systems. This makes them they are basically different from indirect comparisons. Moreover, measurements from these systems appear to act like individuals in the sense that they can be used as subjects to adjectival phrases. For instance, statements like two meters is tall are perfectly grammatical given the proper context. Bale argues that the same semantics for indirect comparison can keep for direct comparisons if measurements take parts in the adjectival relations in the same way as other individuals. Someone has as much height as two meters if they are two meters or taller. In the same way, let us say that the same kind of measurements takes part in the relation associated with wide. Someone has as much width as one meter if they are three feet wide or even wider.

When the measurement system determines the accuracy of comparison, each equivalence class will have at least one measurement. This means, every individual will be equivalent to one measurement. Each equivalence class will only have one measurement because no two measurements from the same system are equivalent. As a result, the ordering of equivalence classes based on tall and wide will be isomorphic to the same measurement system. For instance, if the measurement system were in terms of meter and inches, then the ordering of equivalence classes would be isomorphic to a scale of meter and inches. Therefore, the position of the equivalence classes that has a certain measurement such as two meter, will be similar to both primary scales: the position will be equivalent to the position of the measurement two meters in a scale of meter and inches (Bale 2006:57-58).

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design; accordingly, the data are described and analyzed qualitatively rather than through numerical representation. The analytical procedure is based on the examination of instances of comparative constructions in Amharic.

2.1. Data Sources and Samples

The primary linguistic data for this investigation were obtained directly from native speakers of the languages under examination. In the case of Oromo informants were recruited from Oromia Region of degree students at

Wollo University. Informant-A is a 25 years old male, lives in Wollega Zoze (Southern part of Oromia). Informant-B is a 27 years old male, lives in North Shewa Zone (Northen part of Oromia). Informant-C is a 25years old female, lives in Central Shewa Region (central part of Oromia). For Wolaitta, a 25 years old male student at Wollo University who lives in Wolaytta Zone. These were supplemented by a female instructor (29 years old) at Wolaytta Sodo University; and an additional male speaker (46 years old) lives in the Wolaytta Zone. Consequently, a total of three informants were secured for each of these two languages. Consideration was given to the gender of informants to explore its potential influence on grammatical structures. For Amharic, given the researcher's native-speaker proficiency and academic background in the language as a minor during undergraduate studies, data collection relied principally on reflexive introspection, supplemented by consultation with a colleague works at Woldia University.

2.2. Ethical Consideration

To maintain the integrity of the study and safeguard the psychological well-being of the informants, the following ethical procedures were implemented. The participants were clearly informed that the study aimed to investigate indirect comparison in Ethiopian Afroasiatic languages: Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta. In addition, they were assured that the research did not involve any form of discrimination based on gender, race, belief, or nationality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, their personal identities were withheld, although they were made aware that their contributions would be acknowledged in the main study.

2.3. Data Gathering Instruments

2.3.1. Elicitation

Lists of important words, phrases, clauses and comparison sentences were prepared in Amharic. This enabled me to get sufficient information by clarifying and repeating the questions to the informants. Here is a clearer and more formal paraphrase. In addition, to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the researcher provided all informants with the same set of written questions (comparative sentences). These were then discussed collectively. In cases where differences arose among the informants, further discussion was conducted, and the form most commonly attested in written sources and social media was selected.

2.3.2. Material Analysis

Some materials were used for crosschecking the collected data. For instance, word dictionaries (Wolaytta- English, Oromo- English and Amharic-Oromo and vice versa) and different researches concerning the grammar of each language were used to gather information about the languages.

2.3.3. Data Analysis technique

The data collected from the informants were described qualitatively by relating them to compositional and componential analysis theories of Cruse

(2000), Crystal (1987) and Finegan (2004). First, the data of individual language were analyzed separately (case analysis). Then, based on the analysis made, the similarities and differences among the languages how they compare and contrast things were described (comparative analysis).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Indirect Versus Direct Comparison

Indirect (implicit) comparatives establish a ranking between two entities, x and y, in relation to a gradable property g, by using the positive form in a way that makes it true for x but not for y through contextual manipulation (Kennedy 2007:16) as seen in the following Amharic example (as introduction):

(4) a. kasa-nna johannɨs si-wədaddər-u kasa

Kasa-and John when-compete-3Pl Kasa

rəʒʒɨm nəw

tall Cop: 3SgM

'Compared to John, Kasa is tall'.

b. kə-johannɨs-nna kə-kasa, kasa rəʒʒɨm nəw

from-John-and from-Kasa, Kasa tall Cop:3SgM

'From/ of John and Kasa, Kasa is tall'

3.2. Tests for Indirect comparison

There are three tests that show how the indirect comparison is different from the direct comparison. The tests also indicate the semantic difference between positive and comparative form of gradable adjectives. Hence, indirect comparison manifests the positive form, with regard to vagueness and context sensitivity (Kennedy 2007).

Bochnak (2013:44) explains the three tests: the comparison in sharp judgment contexts, comparison with minimum standard predicates, and comparison with differential measure phrases, which are presented below with examples.

3.2.1. Crisp Judgment

Indirect comparisons exhibit the vagueness of the positive form of relative gradable predicate for they are based on positive forms. For instance, if there is a very slight difference between the heights of two men, it is so difficult to judge that one of the two men is determined as tall, and the other

man is as not-tall. Let's consider the following circumstances in (5a and b), (6a and b) and (7a and b) below.

Context: Suppose two men of a 2 meters tall (this man), and a 1.60 meters tall man (that man) are compared.

Amharic:

(5) a. jɨh	səw	kə- ja	səw	rəʒʒɨm	nəw
this	man	from-that	man	tall	Cop:3SgM

'This man (2m. man) is taller than that (1.60m.) man.' (Direct Comparison)

b. jɨh	səw-nna	ja	səw	si-wədadər-u,
this	man-and	that	man	when-compete-3Pl
jɨh	səw		rəʒʒɨm	nəw
this	man		tall	Cop:3SgM

'Compared to that man (1.60m.), this man (2m.) is tall.' (Indirect Comparison)

Oromo:

(6) a. nam-i-ʧʧ-í	inní-kun	nam-i-ʧʧ-á
Person-Epe-M-Nom	3SgM(Foc)-this	person-Epe-M-OBL
isa-sana-i-rrá	ɗĕeraa-ɗa	
3Sgm-that-Epe-on	tall-Cop:3SgM	

'This man (2m. man) is taller than that (1.60m.) man.' (Direct Comparison)

b. nam-i-ʧʧ-í	kun-ii	fi	nam-i-ʧʧ-i	sun
Person-Epe-M-Nom	this-Foc	and	Person-Epe-M-Nom	that
joo-wal-madaala-n,		inni-kun	ɗĕeraa-ɗa	
when-together-compute-Nom			3SgM-this	tall-Cop:3Sg

'Compared to that man (1.60m.), this man (2m.) is tall.' (Indirect Comparison)

Wolaytta:

(7) a. ha	adde-j	hini	addi-j-a-ppe	ʔaduss-á
this	person-No	there	person-Nom-OBL-from	tall-ABS

'This man (2m. man) is taller than that (1.60m.) man.' (Direct Comparison)

b. ha	adde-j-nne	hini	addi-j-a-ra
this	person-Nom-and	there	person-Nom-OBL-with
geedari-n	wod-é	ha	adde-j ʔaduss-á
compute-by	time-ABS	this	person-Nom tall-ABS

'Compared to that man (1.60m.), this man (2m.) is tall.' (Indirect Comparison)

As can be seen in (5b, 6b, and7b) above, indirect comparisons bring about difficulty and cause to vagueness for it is so difficult to judge that the 2 meters man is determined as tall and that of 1.97meters man is short. However, direct comparisons do not, for they simply require a non-zero difference between the two men. Therefore, the direct comparative in (5a), (6a), and (7a) are true and are acceptable even in sharp judgment context.

In addition, when the languages compare things using the following comparison constructions (8-10), the expression seems unacceptable to verify that one man counts as tall and the other not, when there is only a slight difference in height between them.

Amharic:

(8)	jɨh	səw	kə- ja	səw	gar	si-wədadər
	this	man	from-that	man	with	when-compete
	jɨh	səw	rəʒʒɨm	nəw		
	this	man	tall	Cop:3SgM		

'Compared to that (1.97m. tall) man, this (2m. tall) man is tall.' (Indirect Comparison)

Oromo:

(9)	nam-i-ʧʧ-i	kun-íi	fi	nam-i-ʧʧ-i		
	person-Epe-M-Nom	this-Foc	and	person-Epe-M-Nom		
	sun	joo-wal-madaala-n,	inni-kun	ɗeeraa-ɗa		
	that	when-with-compute-Nom	3SgM(Foc)-this	tall-Cop:3SgM		

'Compared to that (1.97m. tall), this man (2m. tall) man is tall.' (Indirect Comparison)

Wolaytta:

(10)	ha	adde-j-a-nne	he	addi-j-a-ra		
	this	person-Nom-ABS-and	that	person-Nom-OBL-with		
	geedari-n	wod-é	ha	adde-j	ʔaduss-á	
	compute-by	time-ABS	this	person-Nom	tall-ABS	

'Compared to that (1.97m. tall), this man (2m. tall) is tall.' (Indirect Comparison)

As can be seen above, indirect comparisons bring about difficulty and cause to vagueness, because it puzzles to differentiate the height of a 1.97m and a 2m tall object by observing (with no measuring tool); but direct comparisons do not, for they simply require a non-zero difference between the two men.

In addition, when the languages compare things using the following comparison constructions (11-13) below, the expression seems unacceptable to verify that one man counts as tall and the other not, when there is only a slight difference in height between them.

Context: The same to the above, i.e. a 2 meters tall man and a 1.97 meters tall man are compared.

Amharic:

(11)	jɨh	səw	rəʒʒɨm	nəw	ja	səw	gɨn
	this	man	tall	Cop: 3SgM	that	man	but
	rəʒʒɨm		aj-dəllə-m				
	tall		Neg-be:3SgM-Neg				

'This man is taller than that one'. (Intended meaning)
(Lit: this man is tall; but that one is not tall)

Oromo:

(12)	nam-i-ʧʧ-í	inní-kun	ɗĕeraa-ɗa,	garúu
	man-Epe-M-Nom	3SgM(Foc)-this	tall-Cop,	but
	nam-i-ʧʧ-i	inní-sun	ɗĕeraa-miti	
	man-M-Nom	Foc-that	tall-Neg	

'This man is taller than that one'. (Intended meaning)
(Lit: this man is tall; that one is not tall)

Wolaytta:

(13)	ha	adde-j	ʔaduss-á,	he	ʔaduss-á	gid-enna
	this	person-Nom	tall-ABS	that	tall-ABS	be:3Sg-Neg

'This man is taller than that one'. (Intended meaning)
(Lit: this man is tall; that one is not tall)

The failure of this comparison in this circumstance deduces not from manipulating the context to put one man in the positive extension and the other man in the negative extension of the predicate. The predicates involved are vague and thus, speakers are unwilling to accept the truth of both clauses together in cases like (11), (12), and (13) above.

3.2.2. Absolute standard predicates

Absolute standard predicates do not exhibit the context sensitivity and vagueness of relative standard predicates. The standards for appraising the positive form do not depend on a comparison class. Hence, indirect comparisons with absolute standard predicates are infelicitous. An indirect comparison with absolute standard predicate is always false with the exception of limiting cases when one object keeps the property to the minimal or maximal value (Bochnak 2013:45). Let's look at the examples below to illustrate this circumstance.

Context: Both this wire and that wire are bent; but that wire is more bent.

Amharic:

(14) a.	ja	ʃɨbo	kə- jɨh	ʃɨbo	jɨbəlt'	gobat'a	nəw
	that	wire	from-this	wire	exceed	bent	Cop:3SgM

'That wire is more bent than this one'. (Direct comparison)

b. ja	ʃɨbo- nna	jɨh	ʃɨbo	si-wədadər-u,
that	wire-and	this	wire	when-compete-3Pl
ja	ʃɨbo	gobat'a		nəw
that	wire	bent		Cop:3SgM

'Compared to this wire, that wire is bent'. (Indirect comparison)

Oromo:

(15) a. ʃibbo-n	sun	ʃiboo	kun-i-rra	
wire-Nom	that	wire	this-Epe-on	
ʧ'aala-tti	dʒalla-ɗa			
exceed-with	bent-Cop:3SG			

'That wire is more bent than this wire' (Direct comparison)

b. ʃibbo-n	sun	fi	ʃibbo-n	kun-íi
wire-Nom	that	and	wire-Nom	this-Foc
joo-wal-madala-n		ʃiboo-n	sun	dʒalla-ɗa
when-together-compute-Pl		wire-Nom	tha	bent-Cop:3SG

'Compared to this wire, that wire is bent'. (Indirect comparison)
(Lit:When that wire and this wire are compared together, that wire is bent)

Wolaytta:

(16) a. he	ʃibo-j	ha-nni	ʃibo-j-a-ppe	keehi	geell-á
that	wire-Nom	this-Foc	wire-Nom-OBL-from	very	bent-ABS

'That wire is more bent than this one' (Direct Comparison)

b. he	ʃibo-j-nne	ha	ʃibo-j	geedari-n
tha	wire-Nom-and	this	wire-Nom	compute-by
wod-é	he	ʃibo-j	geell-á	
time-ABS	that	wire-Nom	bent-ABS	

'Compared to this wire, that wire is bent'. (Indirect comparison)
(Lit:When that wire and this wire are compared, that wire is bent)

As can be seen in the above examples (14, 15, and 16), since they are not context dependent, indirect comparisons are expected to be infelicitous with absolute standard predicates (Bochnak 2013:173). These expressions 'si-wədadər-u' (Amharic), 'joo-wal-madala-n' (Oromo), and geedari-n' (Wolaytta) do not encode direct comparison; rather, they convey comparison indirectly. All informants interpret them to mean 'when they are seen'.

In the example (17), (18) and (19) below, the comparative operator simply requires two distinct degrees of bent. So, direct comparison is felicitous. Let us look at the following illustrations:

Amharic:

(17) ja ʃɨbo gobat'a nəw
that wire bent Cop:3SgM
jɨh ʃɨbo jɨbəlt' gobat'a nəw
this wire exceed bent Cop:3SG

'That wire is more bent than this one'
(Lit. that wire is bent; this one is not very bent)

Oromo:

(18) ʃɨbóo-n sun ʤalla-ɗa, ʃɨbóo-n
Wire-Nom that bent-Cop:3SgM wire-Nom
inní-kun ʧ'áala-tti ʤalla-ɗa
Foc-this exceed-with bent-Cop:3SgM

'That wire is more bent than this one'

Wolaytta:

(19) he ʃɨbo-j geell-á ha ʃɨbo-j ʃɨn
that wire-Nom bent-ABS this wire-Nom but
kéehi geell-á
very bent-ABS

'That wire is more bent than this one'

As can be observed above, The presence of the modifier /bət'am/ (Amharic), / ʧ'áala-tti / (Oromo), /kéehi/ (Wolaytta) 'very' or 'exceedingly', allows speakers to differentiate the two bent wires that are difficult or are impossible to make distinctions with the positive form alone. Therefore, addition of the adverbs make the comparative sentences felicitous.

3.2.3. Measure phrases

Vagueness and context sensitivity disappear in measure phrase constructions. Indirect comparisons are infelicitous with measure phrase construction; however, direct comparisons are felicitous with measure phrase construction (Bochnak 2013:45), as seen in the contexts below:

Context: Suppose Sofia is 1.72 meters tall, and Almaz is 1.70 meters tall.

Amharic:

(20) *sofja-nna almaz si-wədadər-u, sofɨjja
Sofia-and Almaz when-compute-3Pl, Sofia
bə- hulət santimetr. rəʒʒɨm nat
with-two centimeter tall Cop:3SgF
'Compared to Almaz, Sofia is 2cm. tall'.

Oromo:

(21) *sofijja fi almaaz-i-n joo-wal-madala-n
Sofia and Almaz-Epe-Nom when-together-compute-Pl
Sofijja-n santimeetira lamaa-n ɗeeraa-ɗa
Sofia-Nom centimeter two-with tall-Cop:3SG

'Compared to Almaz, Sofia is 2cm. tall'.

Wolaytta:

(22) *sofija-nne almaaz-a geedari-n wod-é
Sofia-and Almaz-OBL compute-by time-ABS
sofija naaʔ-u santimetr-ija-n ʔaduss-á
Sofia two-OBL centimeter-OBL-by tall-ABS

'Compared to Almaz, Sofia is 2cm. tall'.

In the examples (20-22) above, there is a bit of reservation because the measure phrase seems impossible with indirect comparison; but receives a differential interpretation with direct comparatives for there is a non-zero difference between two individuals in direct comparison. We understand that Sofia is taller than Almaz if and only if we use measuring tools; otherwise we cannot compare them indirectly. Hence, 'Sofia is 2cm. taller than Almaz' is acceptable.

3.3. Indirect Comparison Construction with gɨn, garuú, and ʃin 'but'

All Amharic, Oromo, and wolaytta make indirect comparatives using a free morpheme (conjunctive) /gɨn/ (Amharic), /garuú/ (Oromo), /ʃin / (Wolaytta) 'but', as exemplified in (23), (24) and (25) below:

Amharic:

(23) johannɨs rəʒʒɨm nəw ajələ gɨn rəʒʒɨm aj-dələ-m
John tall Cop:3SgM Ayele but tall Neg-be-Neg
'John is tall; but Ayele is not tall'.

Oromo:

(24) joohaanis ɗĕera-ɗa garúu,
John tall-Cop:3SgM but
ajaláa-n ɗĕera-miti
Ayele-Nom tall-Neg
'John is tall; but Ayele is not tallt'.

Wolaytta:

(25) johannis-i ʔaduss-á ajele-j ʃin ʔaduss-á gib-enna
John-Nom tall-ABS Ayele-Nom but tall-ABS be:3SG-Neg
'John is tall; but Ayele is not tall'.

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* Unacceptable in indirect comparison

In the examples (23, 24 and 25) above, we observe that the tallness of John is contrasted to the shortness of Ayele. The conjunctive word gɨn (Amharic), garuú (Oromo) and ʃin (Wolaytta) 'but' introduces that the height of John and Ayele is in contrast; i.e., the constructions in all the languages indicate that 'while John is tall, Ayele is not tall'.

3.4. Cleft as Indirect Comparison Construction

In Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta, cleft comparisons are indirect comparisons unlike exceed comparisons. Let us consider the following examples once again.

Context: a book (Book-A) with 600 pages and another book (Book-B) with 599 pages are compared.

Amharic:

(26) məsʾhaf-A tiɬikʾ-u nəw
Book-A big-Ref Cop:3SgM
'Book-A is big' / Book-A is the one that is big' (Bochnak 2013:100).

Oromo:

(27) kitaab-n-i "A" isa guddáa -ɗa
Book-Nom-Foc "A" 3SgM (Foc) big-Cop:3SgM
'Book-A is big' / Book-A is the one that is big'

Wolaytta:

(28) matʾtʾaafa "A"-j git-á-ga
Book "A"-Nom big-ABS-Foc
'Book-A is big' / Book-A is the one that is big'

In the constructions of the three languages above, cleft comparison is infelicitous. Moreover, this construction is infelicitous with minimum standard predicates as seen in (26), (27), and (28) above.

4. Conclusion

Indirect comparison is a linguistic strategy that conveys a comparative meaning without using dedicated comparative morphology. Instead, it relies on contextual cues, positive forms of gradable adjectives, or contrastive constructions to establish a ranking between two entities. This differs from direct comparison, which explicitly marks the comparative relation through specific morphemes, for instance,-er in English.

4.1. Key Features of Indirect Comparison with Some illustrations

4.1.1. Use of Positive Form and Contextual Contrast

Indirect comparisons often employ the positive form of an adjective while implying a comparison through contrast.

4.1.2. Vagueness and Context Sensitivity

Indirect comparisons are sensitive to slight differences, making them less precise than direct comparisons. The comparative sentences indicate that it is only acceptable if the difference is significant.

4.1.3. Incompatibility with Absolute Standards

Indirect comparisons fail with absolute adjectives (e.g., bent, dry) because these lack context-dependent standards. The sentences do not naturally imply a comparative meaning.

4.1.4. No Differential Measure Phrases

Unlike direct comparisons, indirect comparisons cannot combine with measure phrases for instance, '2 cm taller'.

4.2. Cross-Linguistic Patterns

The examples from Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta show that indirect comparison is expressed through:

4.2.1. Conjoined clauses: 'X is (Adjective), but Y is not (Adjective)'.
4.2.2. Comparative particles: for instance, gɨn (Amharic), garúu (Oromo), ʃin (Wolaytta) 'but'.
4.2.3. Contextual framing: 'Compared to Y, X is (Adjective)'.

Indirect comparisons support the idea that gradable adjectives are inherently relational (Kennedy 2007). They also highlight the role of pragmatic inference in deriving comparative meanings when explicit morphology is absent (Bale 2006).

Cleft comparisons function as indirect and pragmatically driven strategies, with the standard of comparison being contextually implied rather than overtly marked in the syntax. These structures prove effective in situational contrasts, for instance, 'the fat boy chopped more wood [than others]; but prove inadequate for minimal-contrast comparisons, revealing their dependence on implicit contextual information rather than explicit gradable distinctions.

Generally, indirect comparison is a universal but morphosyntactically varied strategy that relies on pragmatic inference rather than overt comparative markers. Its constraints (vagueness, incompatibility with absolute standards) further distinguish it from direct comparison across languages.

5. Limitations

Though this manuscript provides detailed insights into the semantics of indirect comparison in Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta, it has certain practical restrictions. While both Oromo and Amharic comprise six primary dialects, this manuscript focuses specifically on the varieties used in written materials and social platforms. However, a comprehensive study should ideally incorporate informants from all dialects to ensure representative results. The Oromo data were collected from three young informants. The study would benefit from the inclusion of informants over the age of thirty to

ensure generational diversity. Furthermore, the Amharic analysis relies primarily on researcher introspection; while this allows for deep structural analysis, it would benefit from further field validation to account for broader variations of the language.

6. Recommendation

Indirect comparison is a context-sensitive strategy and pragmatically driven. It deserves further investigation across a wider range of languages beyond Amharic, Oromo, and Wolaytta. In addition, experimental and corpus-based studies are recommended to examine how frequently indirect comparison is used in natural discourse and how it is processed by speakers. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of pragmatic inference in comparative constructions and refine existing theories of gradability and comparison

Author contribution statement:

Mulugeta Adal Assen: designed the research, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the text.
Desalegn Hagos Asfawwesen: supervised, read, commented, and edited the text.
Mulugeta Tarekegne Tsegaye: supervised, read, commented, and edited the text.

The usage of GenAI: ChatGPT was used for grammar checking and paraphrasing in some paragraphs of introduction and literature review.

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