

# The typology of comparative constructions revisited

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## 1. Stassen's major types (1985, 2001, 2005)

Locational type		78	
Separative type	32		
Allative type	7		
Locative type	12		
Exceed type	20	33	
Conjoined type	20	34	
Particle type	<u>18</u>	<u>22</u>	
	109	167	(total)
(Stassen	1985	2005)	

### Locational type

- Separative

(1) Khwarshi (Nakh-Daghestanian; Khalilova 2009: 286)

*Musa Akhmed-λ'a-zi Ø-uxala goli.*

Musa(G.I) Akhmed-SUP-ABL G.I-tall be.PRS

'Musa is taller than Akhmed.'

- Allative

(2) Erromangan (Oceanic; Crowley 1998: 252)

*Nimo enyau nmah momu ra horo-m.*

house POSS.1SG big more to POSS-2SG

'My house is bigger than yours.'

- Locative

(3) Supyire (Senufo, Atlantic-Congo; Carlson 1994: 276)

*mii à tɔn mu na*

1SG PRF be.tall you on

'I am taller than you.'

### Exceed type

- (4) Maonan (Lu 2008: 199)  
*man2 nam1 da6 he2*  
 3SG black exceed 1SG  
 ‘S/he is darker than me.’

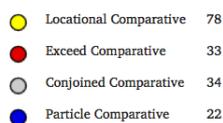
### Conjoined type

- (5) Awa Pit (Barbacoan; Curnow 1997: 353)  
*Pasto=na aynki pueblo Bogotá katsa pueblo*  
 Pasto=TOP small town Bogotá big town  
 ‘Pasto is smaller than Bogotá.’ (‘Pasto is a small town, Bogotá is a big town.’)

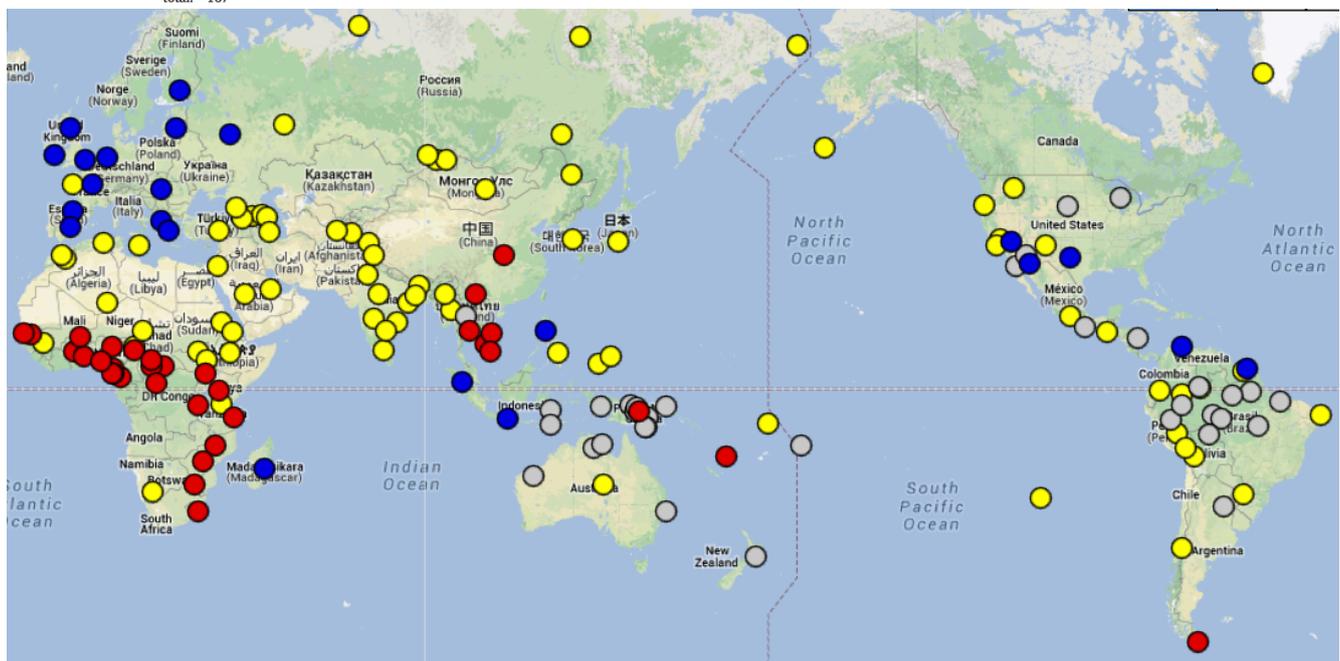
### Particle type

- (6) German  
*Leipzig ist klein-er als Hongkong.*  
 Leipzig is small-CMPAR than Hong Kong  
 ‘Leipzig is smaller than Hong Kong.’

world-wide distribution according to Stassen (2005):



total: 167



as first observed by Heine (1994), there is a clear geographical patterning

## 2. Our classification of comparative constructions

### terminology:

- |                    |                 |   |
|--------------------|-----------------|---|
| (7) a. comparee    | <i>This dog</i> | (cf. Stassen 1985: 26, Dixon 2008: 788) |
| b. parameter       | <i>(is) big</i> | (cf. Dixon 2008: 788)                   |
| c. degree-marker   | <i>-er</i>      | (old term: “comparative degree”)        |
| d. standard-marker | <i>than</i>     | (cf. Haspelmath & Buchholz 1998)        |
| d. standard        | <i>a pig</i>    | (cf. Greenberg 1963, Stassen 1985: 26)  |

### (A) mono-predicate comparatives: clearly a single predicate

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| (8) a. locative standard-marker | (‘bigger on a pig’)                              |
| b. ablative standard-marker     | (‘bigger from a pig’) (= Stassen’s “Separative”) |
| c. allative standard-marker     | (‘bigger to a pig’)                              |
| d. comitative standard-marker   | (‘bigger with a pig’)                            |
| e. other standard marker        | (‘bigger than a pig’)                            |
| f. no standard marker           | (‘bigger a pig’)                                 |

### (B) sesqui-predicate comparatives: a major and a minor predicate, one of them meaning ‘exceed’

- |                                   |                          |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (9) a. primary exceed comparative | (‘exceeds S in bigness’) |
| b. secondary exceed comparative   | (‘is big, exceeding S’)  |

### (C) double-predicate comparatives: two major contrasting predicates (“conjoined”)

- |                                    |                             |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (10) a. antonymic double-predicate | (‘A is big, B is small’)    |
| b. negative double-predicate       | (‘A is big, B is not big’)  |
| c. other double-predicate          | (‘A is big, B is very big’) |

examples of “comitative” and “other standard marker”:

- (11) Nzadi (Bantu; Hyman et al. 2011: 174)

*oŋkàán* ↓ *nápe* *é* *ye* *okúùr* *ye* *oŋkàán* *nápyáá*  
 book this PROG be old with book that  
 ‘This book is older than that book.’

- (12) Lepcha (Tibeto-Burman; Plaisier 2007: 93)

*pemkít* *len* *nurkít* *ʔáryúm* *nyí*  
 Pemkít than Nurkít good be  
 ‘Nurkít is better than Pemkít.’

Stassen's "particle comparative" is defined in a way that cannot be readily applied cross-linguistically:

- particle comparatives have "derived case", i.e. the standard has the same case as the comparee
- the "particle" is not a kind of "case-marker", because the case of the standard is derived from the case of the comparee

(13) *Der Hund ist schnell-er als der Igel.*  
 the.NOM dog is quick-er than **the.NOM** hedgehog  
 'The dog is quicker than the hedgehog.'

(14) *Ich mag den Hund lieber als den Igel.*  
 I.NOM like the.ACC dog better than **the.ACC** hedgehog  
 'I like the dog better than (I like) the hedgehog.'

- but grammars never give information about such special comparative constructions in which the comparee is not simply a subject, so at present we cannot study such cases typologically
- de facto, Stassen's "particles" are elements which do not fit into the other classes (e.g. Javanese and Malagasy – Stassen does not cite evidence that the standard has "derived case" in these languages)

• "multiple options" is a language type in our classification, but not in Stassen's – Stassen recognizes that languages may have several different comparative constructions, but he says:

"I take it that for each language there is a primary comparative construction, which is somehow more 'natural' or 'unmarked' than its possible alternatives." (Stassen 1985: 27)

We do not make this assumption, as we see no reason to make it. Many grammars give multiple comparative patterns for a language and do not say anything about primary or secondary status of the competing constructions.

### 3. Our cross-linguistic data

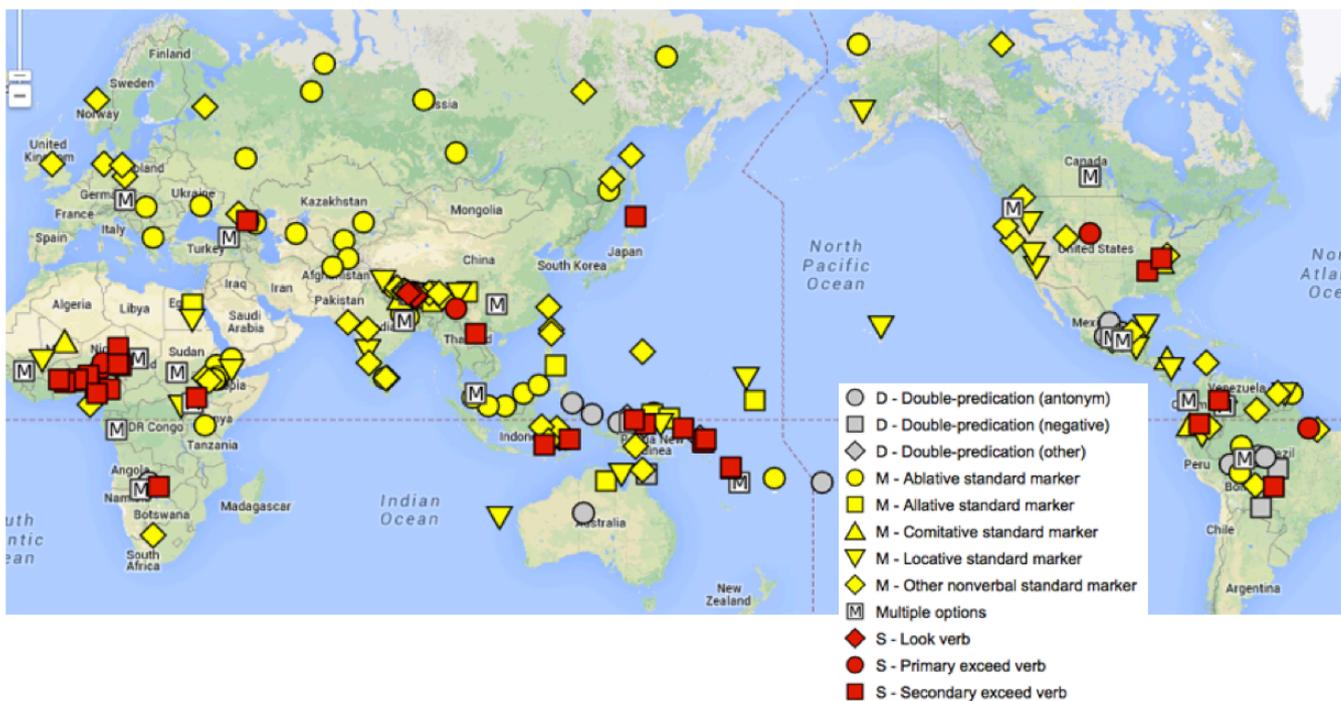
- 230 languages from all over the world
- data from reference grammars, like Stassen
- generally from newer descriptions, typically descriptions of the last 10 years
- no overlap with Stassen's sample of 167 languages
- this is the first replication of a chapter of *WALS*, as far as we know (cf. Plank 2007 on replication in typology)

numerical distribution of languages:

<b>mono-predicate comparatives</b>	<b>145</b>
locative	25
ablative	45
allative	8
comitative	5
other standard-marker	58
no standard marker	3

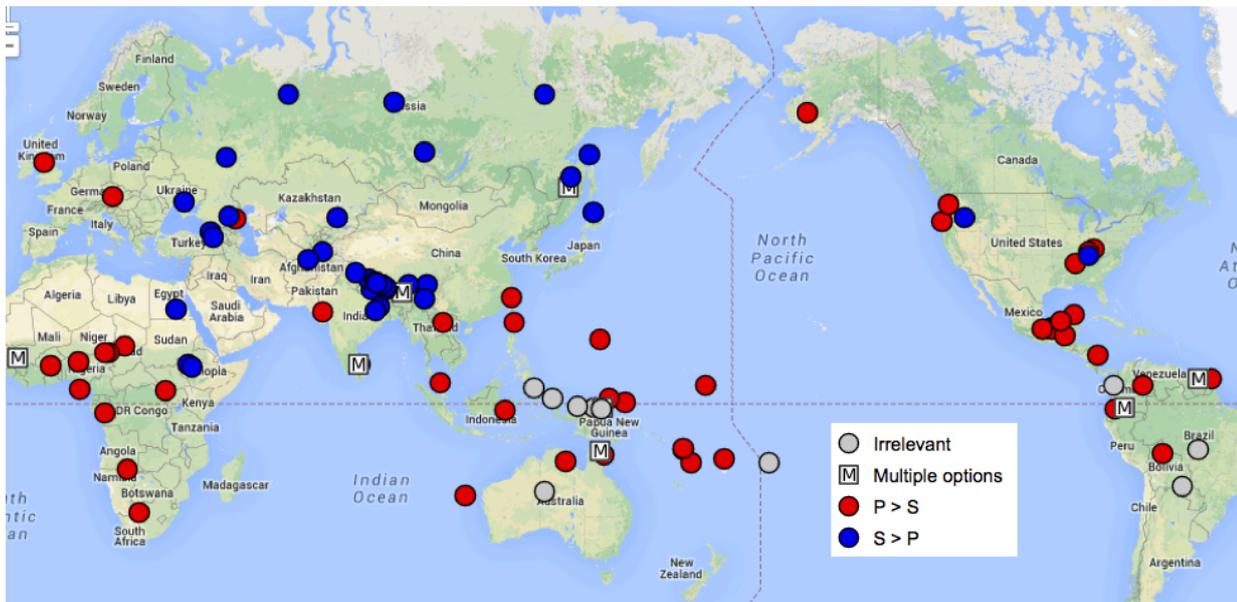
<b>sesqui-predicate comparatives</b>		<b>38</b>
primary exceed comparative	6	
secondary exceed comparative	30	
look comparative	2	
<b>double-predicate comparatives</b>		<b>22</b>
antonymic double-predicate	15	
negative double-predicate	3	
other double-predicate	4	
<b>multiple options</b>		<b>25</b>

geographical distribution in our data:



- distribution quite similar to Stassen, though much less neat
  - double predication especially in Pacific region and South America
  - sesqui-predicate comparatives especially in West Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific region
- “other” standard-markers occur all over the place, whereas Stassen’s “Particle type” was suspiciously restricted

## Interlude: Order of standard an parameter (cf. Andersen 1983)



### 4. Some issues of classification

(i) What if a standard-marker has several of the locational meanings (locative, allative, ablative, comitative)? Solution: a scale from least to most likely meanings:

comitative > allative > ablative > locative

If a marker expresses several of these meanings, it is classified as the highest on this scale, e.g.

Chalcatongo Mixtec <i>nuù+</i> ‘to, into, from, in, on, of’	=> allative
Wambaya Allative case ‘to, from, for’	=> allative
Bhojpuri <i>+se</i> ‘from, with’	=> comitative
Erromangan <i>ra+</i> ‘in, to, from, among’	=> allative
Boumaa Fijian <i>mai+</i> ‘at, from, hither’	=> ablative

(ii) Secondary exceed markers may look similar to degree-markers:

(15) Lao (Tai-Kadai; Enfield 2007: 256)

*khòj<sup>5</sup> suung<sup>3</sup> kua<sup>0</sup> cau<sup>4</sup>*  
 1SG tall more.than 2SG  
 ‘I am taller than you.’

The element *kua<sup>0</sup>* is glossed ‘more than’ by Enfield, but Enfield says that it is “derived from a verb *kua<sup>1</sup>* meaning ‘cross, surpass’”, so we classify it as a secondary exceed construction.

(iii) Primary exceed verbs may not be initial:

(16) Choctaw (Muskogean; Broadwell 2006: 214)

*Hattak-mat chaaba-kat ohooyo' i-sbabli-ka.*  
 man-DEM.NOM tall-COMP:SS woman III-exceed-AFFIRM  
 'That man is taller than the woman.'

Here the exceed verb is regarded as primary because it is the independent verb, while the parameter-denoting verb is the switch-reference-marking dependent verb. (But in other languages, non-initial order is the main criterion for regarding the exceed verb as secondary.)

## 5. The distribution of degree-markers

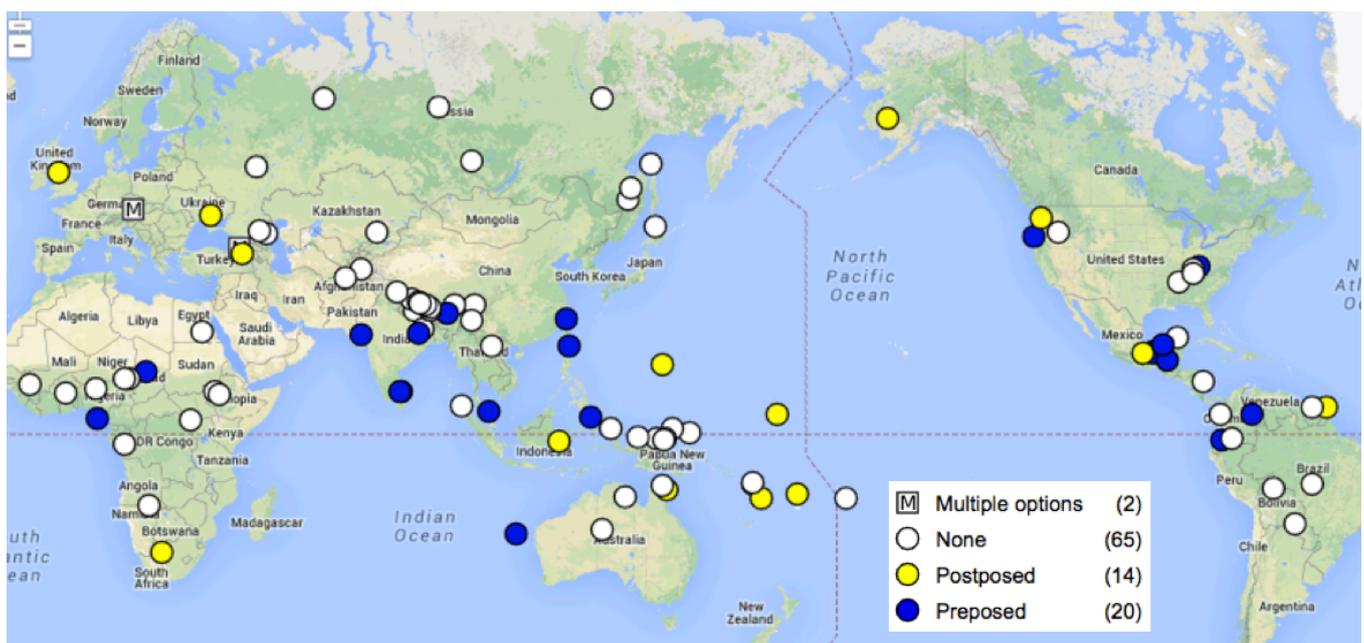
- We have information on degree-markers for 331 comparative constructions.
- Of these, 119 have a degree-marker, i.e. a little more than a third.
- The degree-marker is most often a particle preceding or following the parameter.

(17) Khasi (Austro-Asiatic; Roberts 2000: 155)

*U sohphing u kham kynrei ia u sohphoh bangne.*  
 the mango the [more abundant] to the wild.apple here  
 'The mango is more plentiful here than the apple.'

(18) Kiribatese (Oceanic; Groves et al. 1985: 69)

*e rietaata riki te nii nakon te kaina*  
 3SG [tall more] DET coconut.tree to DET pandanus.tree  
 'The coconut tree is taller than the pandanus tree.'



Degree markers are also possible in double-predicate constructions:

(19) Semelai (Mon-Khmer; Kruspe 1999: 236)

*mə=mirab haʔ rʔ-kēt, ke=sdn rʔ-thəy*  
 REL=be.red at CMPAR-be.small that=SC CMPAR-be.big  
 ‘The red ones there a smaller, these see, are bigger.’

Haspelmath (2001:1501-2):

Most European languages have special forms for adjectives occurring in comparative constructions. For instance, English uses the suffix *-er* in this way (*The dog is bigger-er than the cat*). Such an inflectional marker of adjectives is not common in the world’s languages outside of Europe. Some languages use some

...tive forms also exist in Basque (e. g. *hāundi-ago* ‘bigger-er’), Hungarian (*nagy-obb* ‘bigger-er’), Finnish (*iso-mpi* ‘bigger-er’), and other Finno-Ugrian languages.

Comparative forms are not completely unknown outside of Europe. Arabic has a special comparative form (e. g. *ʔakbar* ‘bigger’, from *kabīr* ‘big’), but it is unique among Afro-Asiatic languages in this respect. Old

Thus, although this feature is not confined to Europe, it is typical of a SAE feature in that it is robustly present in western Indo-European and Uralic languages, but gets rarer the further east we go in these families.

Not really confirmed: Comparative degree-markers are attested elsewhere:

(20) Central Yupik (Jacobson 1995)

*Mikelnguūm alike-nru-llrua yungcarisa elitnaurist-emi.*  
 child.REL fear-CMPAR-TAM doctor.ABS teacher-LOC  
 ‘The child feared the doctor more than the teacher.’

(21) Karo Batak (Austronesian; Woollams 2005: 542)

*gegeh-en ia asangken aku.*  
 strong-CMPAR 3 than 1SG  
 ‘He is stronger than me.’

(22) Atong (Tibeto-Burman; van Breugel 2008: 337)

*Aŋ naŋʔ=na cuŋ-kbal-a.*  
 1SG 2SG=DAT big-CMPAR-CUST  
 ‘I am bigger than you.’

## 6. Some universals of comparative constructions

<b>Universal C1.</b> No language lacks both a degree-marker and a standard-marker.
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That is, there is no language with comparative constructions such as

“The dog is big the pig”

even though one might be able to infer the comparative meaning from the fact that two distinct NPs are combined with a single predication.

This is noteworthy, because it is often said that gradable adjectives like *big* really mean ‘bigger than the norm’, so that a comparison is inherent in them.

**Universal C2.** Almost no language lacks a standard-marker even when a degree marker is present.

This was noted by Greenberg (1963 [1966:88]):

“in many languages, [the degree-marker] is optional or does not exist at all. On the other hand, there is always some element which expresses the comparison as such, whether word or affix, corresponding to English ‘than’...”

We found only very few examples of comparative constructions without a standard-marker, and these invariably have a degree marker, e.g.

(21) Angolar (Portuguese-based creole; Maurer 1995: 25)

*Am masi tame ô.*  
me more adult you  
‘I am older than you.’

(22) Rukai (Zeitoun 2007: 182)

*ma-’adhiidhali toladbekae tongodbae.*  
stat-CMPAR.near Maolin Tona  
‘Maolin is nearer than Tona.’ (< ma-’adhiidhali ‘near’)

**Universal C3.** If a degree-marker is obligatory, the language is a mono-predicate construction.

Degree-markers are very often optional. They are never obligatory in sesqui- and double-predicate constructions.

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