

12 Comparatives

12.1 Asymmetrical comparatives

In **asymmetrical** comparatives, one comparandum is higher or lower than the other on whatever criterion is being applied. Under this rubric I consider several constructions that are explicitly asymmetrical in positive sentences. It should be noted that the symmetrical comparatives covered in §12.xxx, below, can be negated, making them into semantically asymmetrical comparatives.

12.1.1 Simple adjective with dative or ‘like’ comparandum

In one asymmetrical comparative construction, used with adjectives that intrinsically denote measurable qualities, the adjective is directly **conjugated** with subject pronominal suffixes (xx1.a-b). The negative counterpart has stative Negative -lá- (xx1.c). The comparandum is expressed in **dative** form. This construction is less common than the one with gá : rá ‘more’ described below.

- (xxx) a. mǐ-n gùrú-∅
1Sg-**Dat** long-3SgS
‘He/She is taller than I (am).’
- b. bè-rú gùrú-m
3Pl-**Dat** long-1SgS
‘I am taller than they (are).’
- c. bè-rú gùl-lá-m
3Pl-**Dat** long.L-Neg-1Sg
‘I am not taller than they are.’ (gùrú)

For the symmetrical comparative type [wó jín] gùrù-m ‘I am as long (=tall) as he/she (is)’, with L-toned (defocalized) adjective, see §12.xxx, below.

12.1.2 Adjectival verb with direct-object comparandum

This construction is attested with an otherwise intransitive adjectival verb ‘be shiftless, good-for-nothing’ (borrowed from Fulfulde) that does not correspond to a morphologically simple adjective. In the comparative construction, the verb is used transitively, with the comparandum expressed as direct object.

- (xx1) [cè: wó já:sé-sà-∅ ∴ fú:] kò:-ró
[thing.L **3SgO** be.shiftless-Reslt-Ppl.Nonh all] be.Nonh-Neg

‘Lo!, a farmer [topic], there is nothing more shiftless than him.’ 2004.4.4

12.1.3 ‘More, most’ (gá : rá)

A more explicit comparative or superlative is characterized by the adverbial gá : rá ‘more, most’. This is the most common and syntactically versatile asymmetrical comparative construction. In the absence of an explicit ‘than X’ constituent, the unmarked interpretation is superlative ‘most’.

When gá : rá has scope over a following modifying (i.e. non-predicative) adjective, the latter takes **H(H...)L tone**, indicated as “.HL” in interlinears. The combination of gá : rá plus adjective has the same tone-dropping effect on the preceding noun as would the adjective alone.

- (xx1) a. lî-lù:rò gá:rá mǒñù-∅
 Rdp-snake.L **more** bad.HL
 ‘the nastiest (=most dangerous) snake’ (mǒñú) 2004.3.5
- b. ìnè gá:rá gúrì-n
 person.L **more** long.HL-Sg
 ‘the tallest person’ (ònrⁿú)
- c. ñà: gá:rá éru
 meal.L **more** sweet.HL
 ‘the tastiest meal’ (éru)
- d. gá:rá ónúⁿ-ù
 more smooth
 ‘the smoothest, sleekest’ (ònrⁿú)

When the adjective is predicative, it usually appears in **L-toned** rather than H(H...)L-toned form. This is perhaps an indication of aspect defocalization, cf. §10.xx. This is analogous to tone-dropping in unsuffixed Perfective verbs when aspect is defocalized.

- (xx2) kó gá:rá èjù
 Nonh **more** **good.L**
 ‘That [focus] is better (=preferable).’ 2004.5.1

However, in (xx3), the adjective appears to be predicative in function but has H(H...)L tone. This may be because the sentence continues with a ‘than’ clause.

- (xx3) [dù-dùgú-m kùⁿ ∴.] [jòṅ-jóṅó-m kùⁿ ∴.]
 [Rdp-sorcerer-Pl Def] [healing.L-heal.H-Ppl.Pl Def]

mà gǎnnè gá:rá, [tô:-n lè] ê:ŋ,
 Poss between **more** [Recip-Sg Dat] **near.HL**,
 [tò:rù-gú-m ∴ jòŋ-jóŋó-m ∴ mà gǎnnè] sógò
 [fetish-Char-Pl healing.L-heal.H-Ppl.Pl Poss between] than
 ‘Sorcerors and healers are closer (=more similar) to each other than animists
 (fetish-worshipers) and healers are (to each other).’ **2004.**

In (xx4), gá:rá is used with a noun ǎ-n ‘man’, in the sense ‘more of a man’.
 The text is about a caste of griots who beat war-drums and encourage fighters to be
 valiant.

(xx4) ... [gá:rá ǎ-n] táná-ŋá-m̄
 ... [**more** man-Sg] become-Caus.Impf-Ppl.Pl
 ‘those who transform (any fighter whom they follow) into more of a man’
2004.3.15

gá:rá can also be used with **scope over a VP**.

(xx5) a. [émé dî:ⁿ núŋò lè]
 [1PIP place.L Dem in]
 gá:rá èmǎ-n tóróyè sâ:-∅ ké, ...
more 1Pl-Dat pestering(noun)have.HL-Ppl.Nonh Top ...
 ‘In our (=Dogon) country, the one (snake) that most afflicts us (is ...)’
2004.3.5

b. ìnè gá:rá [[kó löy ∴.] [kó sî:ⁿlé] jó: ⇒
 person.L **more** [[NonhP medicine] [NonhP disease] much
 jùgò-m̄ kùⁿ
 know.Impf-Ppl.Pl Def
 ‘the people who know the most about “its medicine” and “its disease”
 (i.e. who know which plants work medicinally on which diseases)’
2004.3.27

In the asymmetrical ‘more X’ construction, the comparandum often appears with
 sógò ‘(rather) than’ or ‘instead of’. For other uses of this particle and of a perhaps
 related particle sógòn, see §17.xxx.

sógò appears after an inflected clause in (xx6.a,c) and after an NP in (xx6.b).

(xx6) a. [kó dàyá tí yèrè-bá] sógò,
 [Nonh leave Link come.Perf.L-3PIS[**instead.of**,
 [nùwⁿó jò:] gá:rá nà:rⁿà-∅
 [death be.many.Perf.L] **more** be.easy.Perf.L-3SgS

'Rather than them leaving it (=lion) and coming (home), it is easier (=preferable) that there be many deaths (of people while killing the lion).' **2004.3.2**

- b. [ñě-n kùⁿ] ú dènê:-Ø,
 [woman-Sg Def] 2SgO want.Impf-3SgS,
 [èné áyà kùⁿ sógò] ú gá:rá dènê:-Ø
 [RefIP husband Def **than**] 2SgO more want.Impf-3SgS
 'The woman loves you-Sg, she loves you more than (she loves) her husband.' **2004.3.20**

- c. [ìnè ínè-m jǎ̀-ⁿ kùⁿ lè]
 [person.L person-Pl convey.Impf-Ppl-Pl Def to]
 émé jǎ̀-Ø sógò, ìné≡yⁿ
 1PIO convey.Impf-3SgS **instead.of**, Refl≡Foc
 [ènè mà nám lè] dém ⇒ émé jà: dèy,]
 [Logo Poss people to] straight 1PIO convey.Perf.L if,]
 èné [kó gá:rá èjù] mà:nâ:-Ø wà
 Logo [Nonh more good.L] think.Impf-3SgS say
 'He said he thought that, instead of him taking us to those who transport people (professionally), if he himself took us straight to his own kin, that would be better if.' **2004.5.1**

12.1.4 'Surpass' (gàrá-)

This can be a simple motion verb 'pass by, go past'. It can also be used in the sense 'surpass, exceed'.

- (xx1) [nùmò-làg-ú túrú jín] gàrà-gó-Ø
 [hand-hit-VblN one like] **pass**-Impf.Neg-3SgS
 'It (=viper) does not exceed (=get longer than) around one elbow span (distance from elbow to fingertip).' **2004.3.5**

12.1.5 'Be better, more' (ìré)

ìré- 'be better than, be more than' is a defective intransitive quasi-verb used in the unsuffixed Perfective only, but with no restriction to past time. The comparandum is expressed as a **dative**. When not chained to a following VP, ìré- takes subject pronominal suffixes (xx1.a). Like other stative quasi-verbs ('be', 'have'), it is negated with -lá- without aspectual specification (xx1.b).

The default sense is 'be better than'.

- (xx1) a. mǐ-n ìré-bá

1Sg-Dat **be.better**-3PIS
'They are better than I (am).'

b. mǐ-n ìrè-lá-bá
1Sg-Dat **be.better**.L-Neg-3PIS
'They are not better than I (am).'

c. ǎ:≡ŷ mǐ-n ìrè-∅
who?≡Foc 1Sg-Dat **be.better**.L
'Who is better than I (am)?'

d. à-n mǐ-n ìré-n kò:-ró
[man-Sg.L 1Sg-Dat **be.better**-Ppl.Sg] be.Nonh-Neg
'Nobody is better than me.'

e. mǐ-n ìré bé:-bà
1Sg-Dat **be.better** stay.Impf-3PIS
'They will remain (=will be) better than I (will be).'

In combination with another VP describing the basis for comparison the sense may be 'be/do ... more than' or 'be/do ... better than'. 'More than' is the sense in (xx2).

(xx2) a. mǐ-n ìré ñǎ: ñê:-∅
1Sg-Dat **be.more** meal eat.Impf-3SgS
'He/She eats more than I do.'

b. ù-rú ìré pàṅá sà-m
2Sg-Dat **be.more** strength have.L-1SgS
'I'm stronger than you-Sg (are).'

The sense 'better' is present in (xx3).

(xx3) a. mǐ-n ìré gó: gǒ:-∅
1Sg-Dat **be.better** dance(noun) dance.Impf-3SgS
'He dances better than I (do).'

b. wò-rú ìré gó: gǒ:-m
3Sg-Dat **be.better** dance(noun) dance.Impf-1SgS
'I dance better than he/she (does).'

A dative with ìré can also have a normal indirect-object sense, hence 'be better for (=please) X'.

(xx4) [bìrè ìñé]≡ŷⁿ mǐ-n ìrè-∅

[work.L what?]=Foc 1Sg-Dat **be.better.L-3SgS**
 ‘What work (=course of action) is best for me?’ **2004.4.6**

12.2 Symmetrical comparatives

Symmetrical comparatives equate the two comparanda on the relevant yardstick. Some of them occur most often under negation, the overall construction functioning as an asymmetrical comparison.

12.2.1 Predicative adjective with jínn ‘like’

One semantically symmetrical comparative involves jínn ‘like’ following the comparandum. A following predicative adjective is often L-toned (defocalized) in this combination.

- (xx1) a. [mí jínn] gùrù-Ø
 [1Sg like] long-3SgS.L
 ‘He/She is as long (=tall) as I am’
- b. [wó jínn] gùrù-m
 [3Sg like] long-1SgS.L
 ‘I am as long (=tall) as he/she (is).’

12.2.2 ‘(Not) so much’ (-làyá)

A construction of the type [ADJ_x-làyá ADJ_x-Neg] is used with adjectives to mean ‘it’s not so ADJ’. In my examples, there is no explicit comparandum, and the construction merely emphasizes that the entity in question is only moderately characterized by the quality.

- (xx1) gùl-làyá gùl-lá-Ø
 ‘long-so.much long.L-Neg-3SgS
 ‘It (snake) is not especially long’ (gùrú) **2004.3.5**

-làyá resembles compound final -láyó ‘very’ (§5.xxx), but informants rejected a direct identification.

12.2.3 ‘Equal; be as good as’ (bǎ: -)

bǎ: - can function as a transitive verb meaning ‘suffice, be enough for (sb)’, in a full range of perfective and imperfective forms: mǐ bǎ: ≡ kò ‘it’s enough for me’, mǐ bǎ: -gó-∅ ‘it isn’t enough for me.’

A homophone (or specialized offshoot) of this verb, used in the perfective system only, is used in comparatives in the sense ‘be as much as, equal’. It competes with dǒ: - (dǒ: -) ‘attain’ in this sense, see §12.xxx, below. Unlike the quasi-verbs and other stative verbs that are confined to the perfective system, bǎ: - takes regular perfective system suffixes, including Resultative -sà- and Perfective Negative -lí- (not stative Negative -lá-). However, the perfective forms are used for any time frame, and no morphologically imperfective forms occur. For example, #bǎ: -gó- (in the relevant sense) was rejected.

bǎ: may be chained to a following VP expressing the substance of the comparison. In the absence of such a VP, the default interpretation is ‘be as good as’. In most examples, bǎ: occurs in negative clauses ‘not equal’ = ‘be/do less than’, but it can occur in positive clauses as well (xx1.d).

- (xx1) a. [ě̀n dē:] bǎ: -lí-∅
 [LogoP father.HL] **equal**-Perf.Neg-3SgS
 ‘He is not as good as his father.’
- b. [lì-lù:rò [cín bǎ:] èmè lè: -gó-∅
 [Rdp-snake.L [thus **equal**] 1PIS.L fear-Impf.Neg-Ppl.Nonh
 [kâ:ⁿ nê]] yó≡kò
 [also now]] exist≡be.Nonh
 ‘There are also some snakes that we do not fear to that extent.’ **2004.3.5**
- c. [ú bǎ:] ñǎ: ñè: -gò-m
 [2Sg **equal**] meal eat-Impf.Neg.L-1SgS
 ‘I eat less than you-Sg do.’
- d. lù:rò-jìjùwⁿó kì-kòjú bǎ: -sà-∅
 snake-mouse Rdp.viper **equal**-Reslt-3SgS
 ‘The spitting cobra is the equal of the viper.’

Adding a negative existential such as kò: -ró ‘there is none’ to a relative clause with bǎ: - creates a stylistically colorful, double-negative superlative.

- (xx2) a. kì-kòjú cè: bǎ: -sà kâ:ⁿ ké kò: -ró
 Rdp-viper thing.L **equal**-Reslt.L any Top Nonh.be-Neg
 ‘There is nothing (=no other snake) that equals the viper (in being dangerous).’ **2004.3.5**

- b. [cè: [kó bã:] èmè lè:-Ø kâ:n]
 [thing.L [Nonh **equal**] 1PIS.L fear.Impf-Ppl.Nonh.L any]
 kò:-ró
 be.Nonh-Neg
 ‘There is nothing that we fear as much as (we fear) it (=cobra).’ **2004.3.5**
- c. [sõm kùⁿ],
 [horse Def],
 [kó bã:] cìgè dáwlè sâ:-Ø kò:-ró
 [Nonh **equal**] thing.L value have.HL-Ppl.Nonh be.Nonh-Neg
 ‘The horse [topic], there is nothing that is so valuable as it.’ **2004.4.25**

12.2.4 ‘Attain, equal’ (dó:-, dó:-)

dó- (dó:-) ‘arrive (at), reach, attain’ can be used in the sense ‘equal, attain the level of’ in comparatives. It is common in the negative (‘it does not equal X’) and in polar questions (‘does it equal X?’). However, it can be used in positive clauses; (xx1.a) has a negative followed by a positive.

- (xx1) a. [ěn dē:] dò:-gó-Ø
 [LogoP father.HL] **reach**-Impf.Neg-3SgS
 gâ: [ěn dérè] dô:-Ø
 but [LogoP brother.HL] **reach**.Impf-3SgS
 ‘He is not as good as his father, but he’s as good as his elder brother.’
- b. [kî-kòjú lè] gùrú ⇒,
 [Rdp-viper Dat] long
 [lù:rò-ùjùwⁿó kùⁿ] dò:-gó-Ø
 [snake-mouse Def] **reach**-Impf.Neg-3SgS
 ‘It (snake sp.) is longer than a viper, but it doesn’t reach (the length of) a cobra.’ **2004.3.5**

Symmetrical comparatives can also be expressed by bã:- (§12.xxx, above).

12.3 ‘A fortiori’ (yê:)

A particle yê: can be used between the two clauses in this construction. The second clause ends in mà, which I take to be the disjunction ‘or’ (it might alternatively be understood as the polar interrogative morpheme). Both clauses have ordinary AN inflections.

- (xx1) a. ú:rⁿó bèrè-gó-m yê:

get.up can-Impf.Neg-1SgS **a.fortiori**
 gó: gǒ̀-̀m mà
 dance(noun) dance.Impf-1SgS or
 ‘I can’t get up, much less can I dance.’

- b. [wó ìjú] bà:-lú:-Ø yê:
 [3SgP dog] equal-Perf.Neg-2SgS **much.less**
 [wó tég-Ø]≡î: mà
 [3SgP speak-VblN]≡it.is or
 ‘You are not as good as his dog, not to speak of (being as good as) himself.’

This was the ‘a fortiori’ construction that I recorded several times in elicitation. However, in one textual passage sógòn (elsewhere ‘because of’) seems to mean ‘a fortiori’; see §17.xxx.

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