A surprising comparison: a unified account of degree surprisingly with bare adjectives and comparatives

Emma Nguyen & Gabriel Martinez Vera
University of Connecticut

Introduction. This paper addresses the adverb surprisingly—and similar expressions, e.g., amazingly, incredibly, strangely, etc. (Nouwen 2011)—in degree constructions. We propose a unified account of degree surprisingly and its ability to combine with bare adjectives (1) and comparatives (2)—the latter being a novel empirical observation. Our proposal provides additional evidence for the presence of differential degrees in the comparative construction. We further suggest that our findings could be extended cross-linguistically.

(1)  a. Alex is tall.
    b. Alex is surprisingly tall.

(2)  a. Gabriel is taller than Tania.
    b. Gabriel is surprisingly taller than Tania.

(1a) means that Alex is tall when compared to the contextual standard—here we assume that there is a degree morpheme, pos, which indicates what the standard of comparison is. (1b) means that Alex is tall to a degree that is surprising to the speaker’s expectation, which need not be greater than the standard (Nouwen 2011). We make the novel empirical observation that the comparative (2b) behaves in a similar way in that there is one degree that is taken into account, namely, the degree resulting from the difference between Gabriel’s and Tania’s height ((1a)-(2a) differ in that (1a) is sensitive to a contextual standard but (2a) is not). Crucially, what is surprising in (2b) is this differential degree—not the degree corresponding to Gabriel’s or Tania’s height. Such evidence adds up to proposals in the literature for which one (perhaps the) crucial aspect of comparatives is a differential degree. On this regard, consider the following contexts: (2b) is felicitous in context (3a), but not in context (3b), suggesting that, regardless of the actual heights of the individuals involved, what is relevant is the difference between the two heights.

(3)  a. You see Gabriel and Tania in the distance and you see that Gabriel is taller than Tania. You think Gabriel is taller than Tania by 2 inches. Upon closer inspection, you realize that Gabriel is actually 10 inches taller than Tania.
    b. You see Gabriel and Tania in the distance and you see that Gabriel is way taller than Tania. You think Gabriel is 6 feet. Upon closer inspection, you realize Gabriel is over 7 feet tall. (But your perception of Gabriel’s and Tania’s height difference has not changed.)

Only one degree adverb allowed. (4) shows that surprisingly cannot modify a measure phrase: the only possible interpretation is that the propositions are surprising (i.e., that Gabriel is 6 feet tall is surprising (4a) and that G(alex) is 2 inches taller than A(lex) is surprising (4b)). This suggests that only one adverb slot (for degree/measure expressions) modifying a bare adjective/the comparative construction is available.

(4)  a. Gabriel is surprisingly 6 feet tall.
    b. G is surprisingly 2 inches taller than A.

Proposal. We assume the syntax in (5a) for a bare adjective and the one in (5b) for the comparative (we ignore the internal structure of the latter), in which one adverb slot is available (4) (Morzycki 2015). A degree morpheme Deg can combine with an adjective A or the comparative. Deg would be the attachment site of pos, surprisingly and measure phrases (e.g., 6 feet) (we ignore the possibility of having an additional degree morpheme meas for simplicity). Following Kennedy & Levin’s (2008) core proposal, we assume that the denotations of adjectives and of the comparative (i.e., of (5) prior to adding Deg) are of type ⟨e, ⟨s, d⟩⟩: an adjective A denotes a measure function m that takes individuals and worlds and gives as output a degree in the scale associated with it (6a). The comparative construction α denotes a differential measure function $m_d$ that is like m except that the degree it returns for an individual in its domain represents the difference between the individual’s projection on the scale and a degree d (that of the comparative standard m(y)): (Kennedy & Levin 2008; Nouwen 2011)—y would be saturated when Deg is combined.

(5)  a. [DegP Deg A ]
    b. [DegP Deg [α more A than y ] ]

(6)  a. $[A] = \lambda x, \lambda w. [m(x)(w)]$
    b. $[\alpha] = \lambda y, \lambda x, \lambda w, [m(y)(x)(w)]$

In the spirit of Nouwen (2011)—but substantially changing the details of his account—we propose that surprisingly is a degree morpheme of type ⟨⟨e, ⟨s, d⟩⟩, ⟨e, ⟨s, t⟩⟩⟩ that is true of measure function m, individual x and (actual) world w iff m (applied to x) in w exceeds m (applied to x) in worlds w' compatible
with the expectations $Exp$ of a relevant individual (for simplicity, we assume that it is the expectations of the speaker $S$) (7). What is crucial in this denotation is the comparison of degrees in different worlds.

(7)  
$$\text{[surprisingly]} = \lambda m_{\langle e,\langle s,d \rangle \rangle} \lambda x_e \lambda w_s \forall w'_s \in Exp_S [m(x)(w) > m(x)(w')]$$

The denotations of (1b)-(2b) appear below. They capture that Alex is tall to a degree that is surprising to the speaker’s expectations (8b) and that the differential degree between two heights (Gabriel’s and Tania’s) is surprising to the speaker’s expectations (8b).

(8)  
a.  
$$\langle 1b \rangle = \lambda w_s \forall w'_s \in Exp_S [\text{tall}(a)(w) > \text{tall}(a)(w')]$$
b.  
$$\langle 2b \rangle = \lambda w_s \forall w'_s \in Exp_S [\text{tall}_{\text{tall}(t)}(g)(w) > \text{tall}_{\text{tall}(t)}(g)(w')]$$

Nouwen (2011) mentions that surprisingly and pos are degree morphemes of the same type, i.e., $\langle e, \langle s,d \rangle \rangle$, $\langle e, \langle s,t \rangle \rangle$ in our analysis. Assuming that pos takes the comparative construction as argument (in addition to a bare adjective) to make it a property of individuals (9a) (Kennedy & Levin 2008), the parallels between surprisingly and pos can be maintained. The standard $\text{stnd}$ for a bare adjective is the minimum degree required to stand out in context relative to the measurement of such adjective; the minimum value of the scale in the comparative—the comparative $\text{stnd}$—is determined by the denotation of the than-constituent. Thus, (1a) is true iff Alex is at least as tall as the standard of tallness (9b) and (2a) is true iff the degree that results from applying the difference function to Gabriel is non-zero relative to the comparative $\text{stnd}$, i.e., greater than the derived zero in the scale represented by Tania’s height (9c).

(9)  
a.  
$$\text{[pos]} = \lambda m_{\langle e,\langle s,d \rangle \rangle} \lambda x_e \lambda w_s \forall w'_s \in Exp_S [m(x)(w) \geq \text{stnd}(m)(w)]$$
b.  
$$\langle 1a \rangle = \lambda w_s [\text{tall}(a)(w) \geq \text{stnd}(\text{tall})(w)]$$
c.  
$$\langle 2a \rangle = \lambda w_s [\text{tall}_{\text{tall}(t)}(g)(w) \geq \text{stnd}(\text{tall}_{\text{tall}(t)})(w)]$$

Cross-linguistic extension. The distribution of adverbs like surprisingly is rather similar cross-linguistically. The table below shows that this is the case in Indo-European, e.g., Dutch (Germanic), Spanish (Romance), Polish (Slavic), and non-Indo-European languages, e.g., Korean, Japanese. It can be used with bare adjectives and in the comparative construction. Crucially, the meanings are those of the English examples (1b)-(2b). Note that the table includes languages such as Japanese (and Korean), which have been claimed to be degreeless (Beck et al. 2004). Although our account focuses on English (and degree languages), the data suggest that a unified account (along the lines of what we propose) could be possible—at least when differential degrees are considered, which is the case with measure phrases like 2 meters in Japanese (Beck et al. 2004: footnote 17). (Note: Polish dziwnie means ‘strangely’; Korean emcheongnake means ‘incredibly’.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>With a bare adjective</th>
<th>With the comparative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>John is verbazingwehhend lang.</td>
<td>John is verbazingwehhend langer dan Bill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Gabriel es sorprendentemente alto.</td>
<td>Gabriel es sorprendentemente más alto que Tania.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Jan jest dziwnie wysoki.</td>
<td>?Jan jest dziwnie wyższy od Bila.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Conclusion. We propose a unified account of degree surprisingly with bare adjectives and comparative constructions. Our proposal modifies and extends the gist of Nouwen’s (2011) account to the comparative but also keeps the parallels in the distribution of surprisingly and pos. Our proposal is, in principle, extensible to other languages where degree surprisingly shows the same distribution and emphasizes the role of differential measurement in comparatives.