

The Preposition-like Verb *hu* in ʔaʔaʔuθəm Comparative Constructions

ʔaʔaʔuθəm, also known as Sliammon or Mainland Comox, is a critically endangered Coast Salish language spoken in British Columbia. This paper aims to explore the syntactic and semantic properties of the preposition-like element *hu* ‘than’ commonly used in comparative constructions in ʔaʔaʔuθəm, as exemplified below in (1):

- (1) *k^weʔet tih memaw hu/θu čenu.*
more big cat than dog
‘That cat is bigger than the dog.’

What makes this preposition-like element interesting is its connection to the verb *hu* ‘to go’. The fact that this element *hu* is indeed semantically related to, and not just homophonous to, the motion verb *hu* ‘to go’ is reinforced by its exchangeability with another form, *θu*, which is also the variant of the motion verb *hu*. Cross-linguistically, the conceptual affiliation between spatial expressions, such as motion verbs and directional prepositions, and comparatives is well represented (Hohaus, 2012; Stassen, 1985); ʔaʔaʔuθəm may therefore be another language that employs this spatial-comparative relation.

In addition, the element *hu* ‘than’ also demonstrates some syntactic peculiarities which are common among so-called “relator verbs” (Kuipers, 1967) or “preposition-like verbs” (Kroeger, 1999). Following Jacobs’s (2013) analysis of a similar phenomenon in Squamish, we argue that — despite its superficial similarity and semantic association to the motion verb — *hu* ‘than’ does not act as a verb in comparative constructions, but instead has been grammaticalized to a preposition. This argument is supported by the observation that, unlike its verbal counterpart, it cannot be inflected. Compare, for instance, the following examples, where personal marking is obligatory for verbal *hu* in (2) but not for prepositional *hu* (3):¹

- (2) *hu-č/*hu Vancouver st⁰uk^w.*
go-1.SG.INDC/*go Vancouver today
‘I’m going to Vancouver today.’
- (3) *k^weʔet-čx^w xaχat hu/*hu-čx^w čəni.*
more-2.SG.INDC tall than/*than-2.SG.INDC I
‘You’re taller than me.’

The result of this investigation is an empirically substantiated, formal analysis of comparative constructions in ʔaʔaʔuθəm, which (i) enriches our understanding of the well-established conceptual link between motion and comparison, and (ii) presents new evidence for the grammaticalization of relator verbs in Coast Salish languages. The implications of this study might spark further research on these issues in other related languages.

¹Abbreviations used are glossed as follows: 1 = first person; 2 = second person; SG = singular; INDC = indicative subject.

References

- Hohaus, Vera. 2012. Directed motion and comparison: Evidence from samoan. In *SULA 6: Proceedings of the sixth conference on the semantics of under-represented languages in the Americas and SULA-Bar*, ed. Elizabeth Bogal-Allbritten, 335–348. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Jacobs, Peter. 2013. Subordinate clauses in Skwxwu7mesh: Their form and function. *Northwest Journal of Linguistics* 7:1–54.
- Kroeber, Paul D. 1999. *The Salish language family*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Kuipers, Aert H. 1967. *The Squamish language: Grammar, texts, dictionary*. The Hague: Mouton & Co.
- Stassen, Leon. 1985. *Comparison and universal grammar*. New York, NY: Basil Blackwell.