

*Ars longa, vita brevis; or:
On the relationship between historical linguistics
and typology*¹

In latino, soprattutto arcaico, esistono frasi di carattere per lo più gnomico del tipo “ars longa, vita brevis”. Combinando i dati della tipologia e della linguistica comparata all’interno della famiglia indeuropea (vedico e lituano), si trovano indizi sufficienti per supporre che questo antico tipo sintattico, residuale in latino, fosse un’antica strategia per esprimere il comparativo in indeuropeo.

1. In the present paper I would like to treat a problem that has been dealt with numerous times in recent years. What I intend to do here is simply to describe some methodological problems I have experienced while working out my chapter on comparatives and superlatives for the project *A New Historical Syntax of Latin* officially presented at the Tenth International Colloquium on Latin Linguistics, held in 1999 in Paris and Sèvres (Baldi / Cuzzolin 2000), a project whose results are now going to be published.

I will try to show that also a case-study like the one presented here, certainly marginal with respect to others illustrated in the literature, at any rate shows that historical linguistics and typology, if correctly used, make it possible to achieve interesting results.

2. First of all, a quotation from Baldi / Cuzzolin (2001: 203) in order to make clear to the reader what is the perspective adopted in the project and what is the new point of view according to which data are interpreted in a diachronic perspective:

In the functional/typological approach, historical syntactic phenomena are analyzed according to a continuum, along which are located param-

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ters relevant to syntactic description. The continuum of possible expressions of a given feature or category is deduced from the typological study of world's languages. Such a study is designed to reveal patterns of expression of particular concepts (e.g. possession, comparison, quantification, imperativity, modality), and to allow the formation of generalizations according to which the data of individual languages can be evaluated.

3. Let us begin by illustrating the typology sketched by Leon Stassen (1985 and 2001).² Using a sample of 110 unrelated languages, Stassen could envisage six main types representatives of the possible strategies of comparison among the world's languages. This difference, however, turns out to be the relevant parameter according to which a typology of the comparative strategies can be established: Stassen (1985) has worked out a typology of 6 basic strategies according to which the comparison of majority is expressed. It must be observed (and usually it is not) that the main purpose of Stassen's book was not to put forward a typology of comparatives but rather to show that the linguistic expression of the concept of comparison is modelled on the linguistic expression of temporal sequencing. This is not an irrelevant detail: for this reason I think that in the very useful paper by Herbermann (= Xerberman 1999), who tried to work out a typology according to formal criteria more sophisticated than those employed by Stassen, both methods and results are criticised too severely.³

Now I will provide an example for every construction listed: however, it must be kept in mind that for almost every type there could be some subtypes. But since they are not relevant here, I omit them.

² Stassen (2001) is a very concise resumé of Stassen (1985).

³ In Heine's book (1997: 112) 8 cognitive domains that serve as source for the expression of the standard of comparison are identified: *source, goal, location, action, polarity, similarity, sequence, topic*. Since Stassen's typological investigation was the only one available when I started my investigation, it turned out to be obvious to exploit it. Recent research, however, suggests that a revised version of Stassen's typology is needed. For brevity's sake I will treat this issue elsewhere.

Table 1 (adapted from Stassen 2001: 995)

FIXED CASE	Direct object	EXCEED
	Adverbial	SEPARATIVE
		ALLATIVE
		LOCATIVE
DERIVED CASE	Conjoined	CONJOINED
	Non-Conjoined	PARTICLE

“Exceed” comparative

Duala (Niger-Kordofanian, North-West Bantu)

- (1) *Nin ndabo e kolo buka nine*
 This house it big exceed that
 ‘This house is bigger than that’

Separative comparative

Mundari (Austro-Asiatic, Munda)

- (2) *Sadom-ete hati mananga-i*
 Horse-from elephant big-3sg.pres.
 ‘The elephant is bigger than the horse’

Allative comparative

Breton (Indo-European, Celtic)

- (3) *Jazo bras-ox wid-on*
 He big-aff. for-me
 ‘He is bigger than me’

Locative comparative

Tamazight (Afro-Asiatic)

- (4) *Enta ihengrin foull i*
 He tall.3sg.masc. upon me
 ‘He is taller than me’

Conjoined comparative

Kobon (Papuan)

- (5) *U kub u pro*
this big this small
'This is bigger than that'

Menomini (Algonquian)

- (6) *Tata'hkes-ew nenah the kan*
strong-3sg. I and not
'He is stronger than me'

Particle comparative

Hungarian (Uralic)

- (7) *Istvan magasa-bb mint Peter*
Istvan.nom. tall-aff. than Peter
'Istvan is taller than Peter'

4. Let us take a look, now, at the data from Latin. The starting point of my investigation was to test how many types and, more precisely, what types of those envisaged by Stassen are attested in Latin. It is a well-known fact that in Latin the comparison of majority is mainly expressed through two similar syntactic constructions, the only relevant difference being the way the standard of comparison is expressed (for a general survey, see Szantyr 1965).

The first type is the one with the standard occurring in the ablative case, the so called *ablativus comparationis* (the most recent and updated contribution on this topic is the very good paper by Torrego 2002; but a necessary reading still remains Löfstedt 1956: 304-330): Pl. *As. 118 non esse servos peior hoc quisquam potest* 'No chance that there is a servant worse than him'. It is difficult to ascertain whether the ablative can be traced back to an original ablative function, i.e. separative function, or if this function has developed from an original instrumental.

The second type is that where the standard of comparison occurs in the same case of the comparee and is introduced by the particle *quam*: *leo est voracior quam canis* 'The lion is more voracious than the dog'.

5. Actually, the picture portraying the situation of the strategies of comparison through the history of Latin is more complex than this.

First of all, already in Plautus the so-called “exceed-type” is well attested and documented (Asensio de la Cruz 2002), even though its function still remains difficult to envisage with respect to the other two types.

In addition there are numerous examples difficult to evaluate: in many cases we have to do with constructions attested not as regularly as the ablative comparative and the particle comparative nor do they seem to be productive. Furthermore, they seem to be functionally rather close to the superlative.

I mention the following cases without any further comment (a detailed discussion is to be found in Torrego 2002):

- *prae*: *prae ceteris feris mitior cerva* (Ap. *met.* 8, 4)
- *praeter*: *ille terrarum mihi praeter omnes angulus ridet* (Hor. *carm.* 2, 6, 13)
- *ante*: *facundia Graecos, gloria belli Gallos ante Romanos fuisse* (Cic. *Att.* 8, 15a, 2)

5.1. From a typological point of view a special mention is due to the case where the standard of comparison occurs in the dative case.

The first example is in Sallust, *Hist Frg.* 2, 37: *vir gravis et nulla arte cuiquam inferior* whereas the last I am aware of, at least by the end of the 6th century C.E., still occurs in Gregory of Tours, *Hist. Fr.* 2, 12: *Nam noveris, si in transmarinis partibus aliquem cognovissem utiliozem tibi, expetissem utique cohabitationem eius.*

It turns out to be typologically interesting because this would be the only case, at least to the best of my knowledge, where a language allows the standard of comparison to occur in two cases that never co-occur in other languages and seem to be mutually exclusive, i.e. dative and ablative (Stassen 1985: 324). I think this is not a clear counterexample, given the apparent extrasystematicity. Stassen, in principle, does not exclude that they can also co-occur.

6. There is, however, another comparative strategy, widespread among the world’s languages, already recognised as such by Jensen (1934) many years ago and that was also discussed by Benveniste

(1948) some fifteen years later, the one that Stassen has labelled “conjoined comparative”. In his turn, Herbermann (1999: 94), building on some of Jensen’s observations, has – in my opinion correctly – defined this type as “coordinative”, intrinsically of oppositive, or contradictory, nature.⁴

Before I go on, it is of relevance to make some remarks on this type, showing that some Indo-Europeanists had looked at this strategy of comparison with some suspicion, as if it were not even a true comparative construction.

These are the words, for instance, by which an open-minded linguist, such as Benveniste, described it (1948: 126):

L’expression de la comparaison n’a nul besoin d’une forme spécifique de “comparatif”. Comparer deux objets est une opération mentale dont se montrent capables tous les hommes, si rudimentaire que soit leur culture, et cette opération ne requiert pas de forme linguistique spéciale. Il suffit d’énoncer successivement deux objets en leur donnant des prédicats de sens contraire pour que la comparaison soit effectuée.

whereas, in a still useful contribution, Jensen, referring to the same comparative type, wrote (1934: 116; my emphasis):

Genau die gleiche Ausdrucksweise finden wir in einer Reihe von Sprachen, in erster Linie Sprachen von *Naturvölkern*.

It could probably turn out to be disturbing to ascribe such a construction to Proto-Indo-European; and in fact no example taken from an Indo-European language is quoted neither by Benveniste nor by Jensen.

More recently, in a paper aiming at envisaging the comparative strategies that can be ascribed to Proto-Indo-European, Jaan Puhvel (1973) also included this type in the quite broad inventory of comparative constructions that are found among the Indo-European languages – broad, of course, if compared with the other linguistic families of the world.

⁴ “Jazyki prvogo tipa ... osyščestvljajut èto, kak pravilo, dvumja sposobami: *kontrarno* libo *kontradiktorno*” [The languages of the first type ... accomplish this, as a rule, in two ways: *by opposition* or *by contradiction*]. (Herbermann 1999: 94; emphasis original)

This type can be found in old, proverbial expression like Latin *ars longa, vita brevis*, that therefore originally had the meaning of “Art is longer than life”, an expression whose formulation is the translation of the first line of Hippocrates’ *Aphorismata* 1, 1, 1: ἡ τέχνη μακρὴ, ὁ βίος βραχύς.

Two questions immediately come to mind:

- on what grounds are we entitled to include this construction in the set of the comparative constructions available in Latin?
- to what extent could, or even should, this strategy be ascribed to the proto-language?

7. If we only had Latin and perhaps Greek data, given the strong influence of Greek on Latin, it would be difficult to decide; we would probably discard them as useless. However, in order to provide a satisfying answer, the data attested in three other branches of Indo-European, namely Vedic, Baltic and Slavic, can possibly help us to give a more correct evaluation of the scanty data in which this construction occurs, also providing a solution for Latin. I will concentrate on Vedic and Sanskrit material because it is very old and because it is possible to follow how the original negative *ná* could develop into a particle with pivotal function in a comparative structure.

Recently, a young Italian scholar, Carlotta Viti, revisiting the topic of comparison in Vedic (already dealt with by Pinault 1985), provided an excellent contribution to a better understanding of this complex issue (Viti 2002). Paolo Ramat (2002), commenting on Viti’s article, has not only accepted her conclusions, but has added further material both from historical and typological point of view. The main result is that, as logicians had already observed, between negation and comparison there is strong conceptual connection also in a diachronic perspective (similar remarks are already in Panagl 1975 and Bertocchi/Orlandini 1996).

In her paper, Viti has convincingly shown that:

- the distribution of the two markers of the standard in the equative constructions in the RgVeda, *iva* and *ná*, is not random: *iva* refers to man and male animals, singular or dual, and syntactically subjects, whereas *ná* refers to inanimate referents, especially mass nouns, abstracts, and meronyms, mainly plural, and syntactically objects;

- that there is good evidence that the hypothesis, originally put forward by Böthlingk and Roth, and supported by Grassmann, Delbrück, Withney among others, according to which comparative *ná* and the negative particle *ná* are the same word (see the discussion in Viti 2003: 72-75) is correct, despite Pinault’s critical remarks (1985: 119).

Given the appropriate context the meaning of negative *ná* shifts to the function and meaning of the pivot in a comparative construction: at least three stages can be identified in the development of the comparative construction (I quote the examples from Viti’s and Pinault’s papers):

- 1) originally negation was employed in comparative equative structures of the type “this is – this is not” like RV 1, 191, 1:

(8) *káñkato ná káñkató ‘tho satīnákāñkataḥ |
dvā v íti plúṣī íti ny àdṛṣṭā alipsata
‘the Kankata, not the Kankata, thus the true Kankata
and the two dangerous insects – the invisible ones, I mean – are
cheated’*

- 2) the second stage is the one in which an equative and a comparative could be felt functionally equivalent: cfr. RV IX 97, 28

(9) *simhó ná bhīmó mánaso jávīyān ‘terrible like a lion, quick like the
thought’, lit. ‘terrible like a lion, quicker than thought’;*

- 3) the third stage is represented by later Sanskrit examples like the following ones, where the negation has taken over the role of pivotal element and the adjective occurs either without comparative suffix:

(10) *varam mṛtyur na cākṛtiḥ ‘death is better than dishonor’, lit.
‘preferable death, not dishonour’*

or with it: in this case, however, the suffix preserves its original function of intensifier rather than of comparative (cfr. Lat. *nive candidior*, *melle dulcior*, corresponding to ‘white like snow’, ‘sweet like honey’ rather than ‘whiter than snow’ or ‘sweeter than honey’):

- (11) *śreyo mṛtam na jīvitam* ‘death is better than life’, lit. ‘very good death, not life’

In addition, Pinault (1985) had deservedly expanded his investigation to other branches of Indo-European, namely the Baltic and Slavic groups, pointing to the persistence in both of this very archaic mechanism of comparing via negation in both popular and conservative traditions.

8. There is, however, a logical step that has to be implied: one has to presuppose that the construction “A is X, B is not X” meaning “A is X-er than B” from the synchronic point of view had a perfect equivalent “A is X, B is Y”, where X and Y were antonyms. In other words, we have to presuppose that in the oldest stage of Indo-European there was the possibility of making a comparison of majority of this type: *The horse is big, the sheep is not big*, with the meaning “The horse is bigger than the sheep”; or similarly: *The horse is big, the sheep is small*. But as we have seen in the conjoined type, these are exactly the two subtypes already quoted, that I repeat here.

It seems to me that this way of looking at our data makes it possible to ascribe this type, too, to the oldest strategies of Indo-European to express comparison. In this sense sentences like *Ars longa, vita brevis* or Pl. *Most. 48: Tu fortunatus, ego miser*⁵ can be compared with the Sanskrit examples of stage three and represent relics of this very old comparative type, probably no longer felt as such at Plautus’ times.

9. One of the consequences historical linguists have to draw is that, if, from a correct methodological viewpoint, we must reconstruct on exceptions, not on rules, the relics of comparison through negation are of particular importance. If we looked only at the Latin data, we would probably dismiss the few cases we have as bizarre, isolated and stylistically marked expressions – such as the example I have quoted.

⁵ A philological quibble: the fact that in the oldest manuscripts of the Latin version of the *Aphorismata* the adjective *prolixa* occurs instead of *longa* (I am grateful to Gerd Haverling for this remark), and that some editors of Plautus read *fortunatu’s* (= *fortunatus es*) instead of *fortunatus* is irrelevant to the present discussion.

However, what entitles linguists to include the conjunction type into the inventory of the comparative strategies ascribable to Indo-European is the fact that this type must be presupposed as existent and productive in the oldest stages of Vedic and Balto-Slavic in order to account for the data at our disposal. The fact that in other branches of Indo-European like Vedic, Baltic and Slavic we can recover the system from which the Latin relics originated entitles us, I think, to not exclude them from the complex chapter of the history of comparison in Latin.

Since this type was mainly used in contrastive or alternative contexts like gnomic sentences or proverbs, it is not the case that to its decreasing corresponds the increasing of the particle type, that started being used almost exactly in the same contexts. But this is a point that should be further investigated.

10. Some conclusions.

- 1) *Ars longa vita brevis* is very likely to represent an instantiation of the comparative construction labelled “conjoined comparative”.
- 2) *Ars longa vita brevis* has to be included in the inventory of the comparative constructions exploited by Latin very early.
- 3) Evidence of the previous points have to be sought outside Latin, through the comparative analysis with documents attested in other Indo-European branches, especially, but not only, Vedic and Sanskrit.
- 4) This comparative type should be ascribed, therefore, to the proto-language, or at least to Late Proto-Indo-European.
- 5) Historical linguistics and typology are not in opposition: also in this peripheral case-study it turns out that they can provide us with new insights into the development of languages: what could be discarded in typological perspective can be sometime (re)motivated by historical linguistics.

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