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## On the Productivity and Variability of the Slots in German Comparative Correlative Constructions

### Abstract

This paper is concerned with the syntactic productivity of the comparative slots in the German comparative correlative construction (*je [comparative] ... desto [comparative]* and variants), i.e. how prone they are to admitting novel forms under different circumstances. Comparative correlative constructions have enjoyed considerable attention in the syntactic literature of recent years, especially regarding their constituents' status as para- or hypotactic, and the question of their semantic compositionality (see e.g. McCawley 1988, Culicover & Jackendoff 1999 for the English equivalents, Beck 1997 for German and den Dikken 2005 for a cross-linguistic account). However, comparisons of the comparative clauses in these constructions, as well as their relationship with comparatives both in other conditionals and at large, have given little attention to patterns in the typical lexemes occupying the variable slots of these patterns, using mostly introspective examples instead and often assuming a syntactic rule may generate the postulated categories regardless of the lexical contents of the constituents. Yet these facts have a bearing on the productivity and the semantics of the constructions, and possibly also on their debated compositionality, idiomaticity and idiosyncrasy.

The present paper attempts to fill this gap for German by examining regularities in comparatives with and without *je* and *desto* in corpus data. In particular I will apply empirical measures and quantitative gradient notions of productivity developed in studies of morphological productivity (see Bauer 2001 for an overview and Barðdal 2006 and Kiss 2007 for recent applications to syntax) to half-filled syntactic constructions, while working within the framework of Construction Grammar (following Goldberg 1995, 2006). Since it is impossible to directly or reliably evaluate the novelty, transparency and regularity indicative of productivity for all items associated with a process, Baayen (2001, 2009) suggests that different aspects of productivity can be assessed, at least for a certain register, from corpus data, using the type and token frequencies of a word formation, as well as the frequencies of items appearing only once in the corpus (*hapax legomena*), which are assumed to be a superset of the neologisms therein.

Following Kiss (2007), who applies Baayen's measures to the nominal slot of determinerless PPs in German, I will apply the same measures both to one-slot constructions, such as comparatives in general and following *je* and *desto*, as well as multi-slot constructions containing both comparatives. The application of the measures to syntax requires some adaptation to accommodate multiple slots, as well as solutions to some unknowable quantities, such as the total number of constructions in the corpus. The comparison of a construction to its constituents also raises some methodological issues. The results of the study show not only limitations on the comparatives admissible to this construction, but also further limitations of the second clause in some respects as compared to the first. An analysis of the verbless variant *je [comparative], desto [comparative]*, often described as simply involving copula ellipsis (e.g. Zifonun et al. 1997: 2338), will show some special restrictions on productivity as well.

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