

# Cross-linguistic variation in conjoined comparatives

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## 1. The puzzle

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Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan; Australia) and Washo (isolate; USA) both use **conjoined comparatives** as a primary comparative strategy (Bowler 2016; Bochnak 2013, 2015).

The denotations of property concept words in Warlpiri and Washo are the same, as are the truth conditions for their conjoined comparatives:

- (1)  $\llbracket P_W \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. x \text{ is } P \text{ in } c$   $\langle e, t \rangle$
- (2)  $\llbracket x \text{ is } P_W, y \text{ is } Q_W \rrbracket^c = 1$  iff  $x \text{ is } P \text{ in } c \wedge y \text{ is } Q \text{ in } c$

In **crisp judgment contexts**, Warlpiri and Washo conjoined comparatives differ in their acceptability:

- (3) Context: There are six trees; two of the trees differ only slightly in size.  
Nyampu watiya wirijjarlu, wita nyampu=ju.  
this tree big small this=TOP  
'This tree is big, this one is small.' Warlpiri
- (4) Context: There are two pinecones. One is slightly bigger than the other.  
# wí:di? behéziŋ-a?-š lák'a? wí:di? t'-í:yel-i?  
this small-DEP-SR one this NMLZ-big-ATTR  
Intended: 'This one is small, this one is big.' Washo (Ryan Bochnak, p.c.)

**Why are conjoined comparatives felicitous in crisp judgment contexts in Warlpiri?**

Why are conjoined comparatives infelicitous in crisp judgment contexts in Washo?

What does the crisp judgment test tell us about the semantics of property concepts?

**Roadmap:**

- Background on conjoined comparatives and crisp judgments
- Crisp judgments with vague predicates
- Definite descriptions in Warlpiri
- Overview of variation in conjoined comparatives
- Conclusion

**2. Background**

- Stassen (1985, 2013); Ultan (1972): Languages vary in the morphosyntax that they use to express comparison.

(5) Mary is taller than Ruth.

- Hohaus and Bochnak (2020): Grammatical versus pragmatic comparatives.
- **Grammatical comparatives** contain comparative morphology explicitly encoding an ordering relation (e.g. English *-er*, Basque *-ago*, Hungarian *-bb*):

(6) Basque (isolate, Spain)

Jakes        baino lodi-ago da  
 Jakes.NOM than fat-COMP he.is  
 ‘He is fatter than Jakes.’

(Stassen 1985, 61)

- **Pragmatic comparatives** are based on positive predications; they lack uniquely comparative morphology, and the ordering relation is inferred.

**Conjoined comparatives:**

Two separate clauses with two predicates; one clause contains the compared item, while the other contains the standard.

(7) Amele (Trans-New Guinea, PNG)

jo    i    ben jo    eu nag  
 house this big house that small  
 ‘This house is bigger than that house.’

Literally: ‘This house is big, that house is small.’ (Stassen 2013; Roberts 1987)

(8) Warekena (Arawakan, Brazil and Venezuela)

wafi    futfi puatfi    puɾapiami  
 jaguar big monkey thin  
 ‘The jaguar is bigger than the monkey.’

Literally: ‘Jaguar is big, monkey is thin.’ (Aikhenvald 1998, 244)

- Stassen (2013): “The Conjoined Comparative has a stronghold in Australia and New Guinea, and is also prominent in the Amazon basin.”

## 2.1. Comparatives in crisp judgment contexts

- Positive predications are context sensitive, vague, and require that the individual “stand out” with respect to the contextual standard for the predicate (Graff 2000; Kennedy 2011).

(9) John is tall.

a.  $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. \text{tall}(x,d)$

b.  $\llbracket \text{POS} \rrbracket^c = \lambda G_{\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle} \lambda x. \exists d [G(x,d) \wedge d >_! \text{standard}_{G,c}]$

c.  $\llbracket \text{John is POS tall} \rrbracket^c = 1 \text{ iff } \exists d [\text{tall}(\text{John},d) \wedge d >_! \text{standard}_{\text{tall},c}]$

- Conjoined comparatives are conjunctions of positive predications; as such, we expect a difference in acceptability between grammatical and conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts (Kennedy 2007a).
- **Crisp judgment contexts:**  
Contexts in which the compared individuals differ only a very small amount with respect to the relevant property.

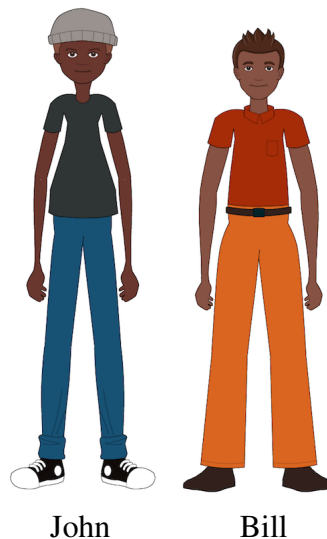


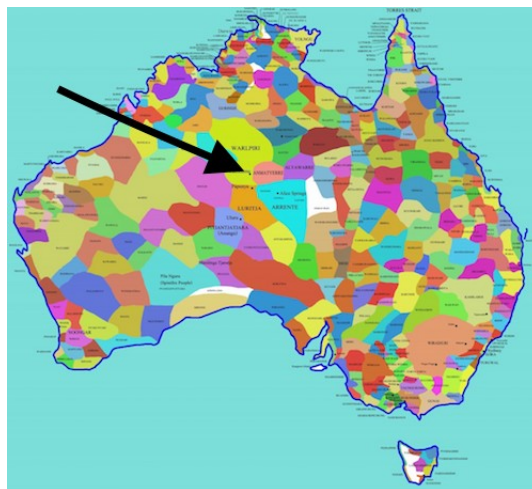
Figure 1<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Images were made using Pixton: <https://www.pixton.com/>.

- Grammatical comparatives directly encode an ordering relation; they are felicitous in crisp judgment contexts because of the lack of positive semantics.
- (10) a.  $\llbracket \text{-er} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle d,t \rangle} \lambda Q_{\langle d,t \rangle} \cdot \max(Q) > \max(P)$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{John is taller than Bill} \rrbracket = 1$  iff  $\max(\lambda d. \text{tall}(\text{John}, d)) > \max(\lambda d'. \text{tall}(\text{Bill}, d'))$
- Conjoined comparatives are conjunctions of positive predications:
- (11)  $\llbracket \text{John is POS tall, Bill is POS short} \rrbracket^c = 1$  iff  
 $\exists d[\text{tall}(\text{John}, d) \wedge d >_! \text{standard}_{\text{tall}, c}] \wedge \exists d'[\text{short}(\text{Bill}, d') \wedge d' >_! \text{standard}_{\text{short}, c}]$
- Positive predications are subject to the Similarity Constraint (Klein 1980; Graff 2000; Kennedy 2011, 2):  
 “When x and y differ only to a very small degree in the property that a vague predicate G is used to express, speakers are unable or unwilling to judge the proposition that x is G true and y is G false.”
  - In a crisp judgment context, neither individual “stands out” enough to license the positive predications; speakers should be unwilling to simultaneously accept the truth of both clauses.
  - Speakers of conjoined comparative languages should not be able to use them to describe Figure 1.
  - Bochnak (2013, 2015) uses unacceptability in crisp judgment contexts as a diagnostic of degreelessness in Washo: Only grammatical comparatives can encode an ordering relation  $>$ , which requires the ability to order on a degree scale.

### 3. Data

Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan, Ngumpin-Yapa; Australia); 3000 speakers.



Data in this handout was elicited using visual contexts, verbal contexts, and objects.  
Worked with 7 speakers in Yuendumu in 2014, 2015, and 2019.

Bowler (2016):

- Warlpiri lacks degree morphology (equivalents of *-er, as, too*, measure phrases, etc.); comparatives are conjoined.
- (12) Nyirripi=ji nguru yukanti. Yurntumu=ju wirijarlu.  
Nyirripi=TOP country small Yuendumu=TOP big  
Prompt: ‘Nyirripi is smaller than Yuendumu.’  
Literally: ‘Nyirripi is a small place. Yuendumu is big.’
- (13) Ngaju-nyangu kaji-nyanu wita.  
1SG-POSS son-POSS small.  
Prompt: ‘My son is 3 feet tall.’  
Literally: ‘My son is short.’
- (14) Kurlarda=mayi kirrirdimpayi?  
spear=Q long  
Prompt: ‘How long is the spear?’  
Literally: ‘Is the spear long?’
- Like Washo, Warlpiri property concepts lack degree arguments; they are Kleinian vague predicates of type  $\langle e,t \rangle$ :
- (15)  $\llbracket P_W \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. x \text{ is } P \text{ in } c$  (Alternately:  $\llbracket P_W \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. x \in P^{+,c}$ )
- Follows degreeless proposals by Beck et al. (2009) for Motu (Austronesian; Papua New Guinea); Pearson (2010) for Fijian (Austronesian; Fiji) (but see Hanink 2019); and Bochnak (2013, 2015) for Washo.
  - According to Beck et al. (2009)’s classification: Warlpiri has a negative setting of the Degree Semantics Parameter.

Kennedy (2007a): Conjoined comparatives should be infelicitous in crisp judgment contexts.

- Contrary to Kennedy (2007a)’s predictions, Warlpiri conjoined comparatives are produced and accepted in crisp judgment contexts.

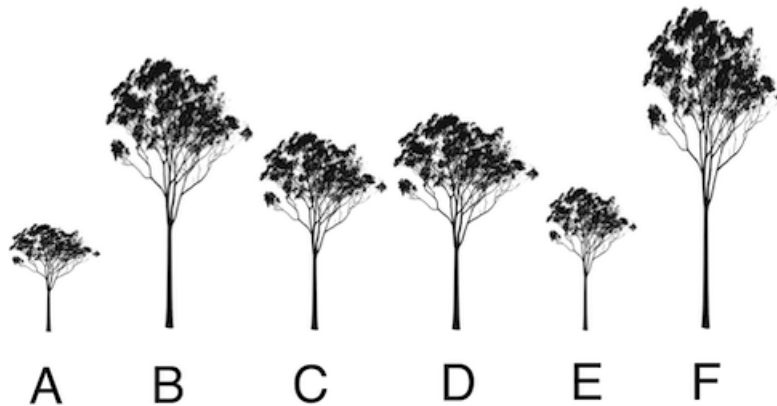


Figure 2

- (16) Context: There are six trees; two of the trees differ only slightly in size.  
 Nyampu watiya wirijjarlu, wita nyampu=ju.  
 this tree big small this=TOP  
 ‘This tree is big, this one is small.’
- (17) Context: There are six stones; two of the stones differ only slightly in width.  
 Nyampu pirli wantiki, nyampu wuurnpa.  
 this stone wide this narrow  
 ‘This stone is wide, this one is narrow.’
- This contrasts with Washo; Washo speakers reject conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts (Bochnak 2013, 2015):
- (18) Context: There are two pinecones. One is slightly bigger than the other.  
 # wí:diʔ behéziŋ-aʔ-š lák’aʔ wí:diʔ t’-í:yel-iʔ  
 this small-DEP-SR one this NMLZ-big-ATTR  
 Literally: ‘This one is small, this one is big.’ (Ryan Bochnak, p.c.)

**Why are Warlpiri conjoined comparatives acceptable in crisp contexts, contrary to Kennedy (2007b)’s predictions?**

How can we account for the difference in acceptability between Warlpiri and Washo?

**4. Crisp judgments with vague predicates**

Klein (1980):

- Gradable adjectives are vague predicates of type ⟨e,t⟩

- Interpreted relative to comparison classes of individuals supplied contextually
- Denote partial functions from individuals to truth values

- (19) a.  $\llbracket x \text{ is } P \rrbracket^c = 1$  iff  $x \in P^+$  in  $c$  positive extension  
 b.  $\llbracket x \text{ is } P \rrbracket^c = 0$  iff  $x \in P^-$  in  $c$  negative extension  
 c.  $\llbracket x \text{ is } P \rrbracket^c = \text{undefined}$  otherwise extension gap

- Informativity Constraint on vague predicates (Kennedy 2011, 4):  
 “Both the positive and negative extension of a vague predicate [must] be non-empty (such predicates are not useful if there are not things that they are true of and things that they are false of).”

Deal and Hohaus (2019):

- Like Warlpiri, gradable property concepts in Nez Perce (Sahaptian; USA) are degreeless and felicitous in comparatives in crisp judgment contexts:

(20)  $\llbracket \textit{kuhet}$  ‘tall<sub>NP</sub>’  $\rrbracket^c = \lambda x. x$  counts as tall with respect to context  $c$

(21) Context: Drea is 5’8” (172.7cm). I am 5’7 3/4” (172.1cm), just a hair shorter.

Drea hii-wes qetu kuhet ’iin-im-x.  
 Drea.NOM 3SUBJ-be.PRES MORE tall 1SG-OBL-to  
 ‘Drea is taller than me.’

- Deal and Hohaus (2019) propose a Kleinian semantics for *qetu* ‘more’ with existential quantification over contexts (type K): Nez Perce *qetu* comparatives are true as long as there exists a context in which the gradable predicate is true when applied to one individual and false when applied to the other.

(22)  $\llbracket \textit{qetu}$  ‘more<sub>NP</sub>’  $\rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda P_{\langle K, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle} \lambda y. \exists C' [P(C')(x) = 0 \wedge P(C')(y) = 1]$

- Comparison follows from Consistency Constraints on gradable predicates (Klein 1980; Kennedy 2011):
  - If  $G(x)$  is true in  $c$  and  $G(y)$  is false in  $c$ , then  $x$  exceeds  $y$  relative to the scalar concept encoded by  $G$
  - If  $G(x)$  is true in  $c$  and  $G(y)$  is false in  $c$ , then for any  $c'$  such that  $G(y)$  is true in  $c'$ ,  $G(x)$  is also true in  $c'$
- Not an appealing solution for Warlpiri, since Warlpiri lacks any analog to Nez Perce *qetu*; ideally want a transparent mapping from morphosyntax to semantics.

Kennedy (2007b):

- Implicit comparatives are infelicitous in crisp judgment contexts.

(23) This book is long compared to that book.

- ✓ Book 1 is 100 pages and book 2 is 50 pages.
- # Book 1 is 100 pages and book 2 is 99 pages.

- Kennedy (2007b)'s claim: Klein (1980) erroneously predicts that they should be acceptable.
- Kennedy treats *compared to* phrases as restricting the context to just the two compared items:

(24)  $\llbracket$  This book is long compared to that book  $\rrbracket^c$

= 1 in  $c$  iff  $\llbracket$  This book is long  $\rrbracket = 1$  in every context  $c'$  that is just like  $c$  except that the domain of discourse includes just this book and that book

- Assuming the Informativity Constraint on vague predicates, if this book is long, that book must be not long:

(25) This book is long compared to that book.

- Context: {this book, that book} meaning of *compared to*
- $\llbracket$  This book is long  $\rrbracket^c = 1$  in  $c$
- $\llbracket$  That book is long  $\rrbracket^c = 0$  in  $c$  by Informativity

- Taken together with Consistency Constraints, this predicts acceptability of (25) regardless of the difference in length between the two books.
- Pearson (2010): Also manipulates the context to account for Fijian comparative data.

### Applicability to Warlpiri data:

- Null hypothesis: Informativity Constraint and Consistency Constraints are active in Warlpiri.
  - The purpose of adjectives/property concepts is to contrast items (Sedivy et al. 1999); no evidence that Warlpiri speakers use property concepts for different communicative purposes than English speakers
  - Consistency Constraints reflect language-independent entailments of gradable predicates
- The following data suggests that the context is restricted in Warlpiri conjoined comparatives, like Kennedy (2007b)'s *compared to*-comparatives:



- (26) Context: Liddy and Judy are both short women (under 5 feet/152 cm).  
 Liddy=ji kirrirdimpayi, Judy ngula=ju rdangkarlpa.  
 Liddy=TOP tall Judy PRONOUN=TOP short  
 Prompt: ‘Liddy is taller than Judy.’  
 Literally: ‘Liddy is tall, Judy is short.’
- (27) Context: In 2014, Melbourne’s population is 4.5 million and Sydney’s population is 4.8 million (i.e., both are big cities).  
 Melbourne=ju yukanti, Sydney=ji wirijarlu.  
 Melbourne=TOP small Sydney=TOP big  
 Prompt: ‘Melbourne is smaller than Sydney.’  
 Literally: ‘Melbourne is small, Sydney is big.’ (Bowler 2016)
- If evaluated against broader comparison classes (all Warlpiri women; all cities in Australia), it should be infelicitous to state that Liddy is tall or Melbourne is small.
  - Kennedy (2007b)’s objection to Klein (1980) can explain why Warlpiri conjoined comparatives are acceptable in crisp judgment contexts.
  - Propose to derive Kennedy’s context restriction with reference to Warlpiri-specific properties.

## 5. Definite descriptions in Warlpiri

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Definite DPs presuppose existence and uniqueness (Russell 1905; Kadmon 1990, a.o).

- (28) I saw the bear at the zoo.  
 ⇒ Presupposes that there is a unique bear at the zoo

Syrett et al. (2010, 2006):

- These presuppositions are active in interpreting definite descriptions with relative gradable adjectives.
- (29) Context: There are two blue rods of unequal lengths.  
 Please give me the long rod.  
 ⇒ Presupposes that there is a unique long rod in the context
- Syrett et al. 2010, 5: “Given that there are two salient rods in the context, the only way to satisfy these presuppositions is to make *long* true of one of them and false of the other one.”

- Syrett et al. (2010, 2006) show that speakers accept (29) as a request for the longer of the two rods, even if the rods are independently judged as long/not long; i.e., they shift their standards.

### Definiteness in Warlpiri

Like most Australian languages (Dixon 2002):

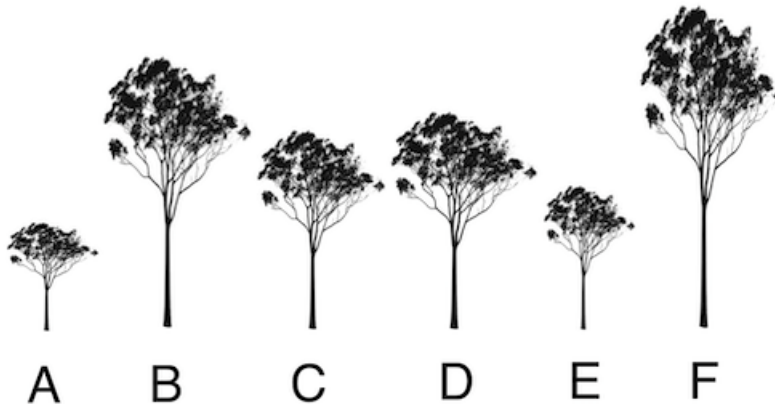
- Warlpiri property concept words are nouns (Simpson 2005, a.o).
- (30) Kapirdi wirijarlu.  
older.sister big  
'The older sister is big.' (Warlpiri Dictionary Project)
- (31) Napangardi wijipalka.  
Napangardi thief  
'Napangardi is a thief.'
- (32) Wirijarlu-nyayirni ngamirni-rli=ji palka-ma-nu.  
big-INTENS uncle-ERG=TOP presence-do-PST  
'Uncle found a really big one.' (Warlpiri Dictionary Project)
- Warlpiri lacks determiners.
- (33) Ngarrka ka=rna nya-nyi.  
man AUX.PRES=1SUBJ see-NPST  
a. 'I see the man.'  
b. 'I see a man.' (Hale 1983, 31-32)

Bittner and Hale (1995):

- Warlpiri nouns can be interpreted definitely, indefinitely, or predicatively.
- (34) Kurdu ka=rna nya-nyi.  
child AUX.PRES=1SG see-NPST  
a. 'I see a child.'  
b. 'I see the child.'  
c. 'I see him/her, who is a child.' (Bittner and Hale 1995, 18)
- Bittner and Hale (1995) assume Link (1983)'s type-shifting  $\sigma$  operator to derive definiteness; I'll use the iota operator, where  $\iota x[P(x)]$  denotes the unique  $x$  such that  $P(x)$ .

- (35) a.  $\llbracket \text{child} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \text{child}(x)$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{the child} \rrbracket = \iota x[\text{child}(x)]$
- (36) a.  $\llbracket \text{tall}_W \rrbracket^c = \lambda x. x \in \text{tall}^{+,c}$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{the tall}_W \rrbracket^c = \iota x[x \in \text{tall}^{+,c}]$

**As nouns, Warlpiri property concept words can be interpreted definitely in conjoined comparatives.**



- (37) Context: There are six trees; two of the trees differ only slightly in size.  
 Nyampu watiya wirijarlu, wita nyampu=ju.  
 this tree big small this=TOP  
 ‘This tree is the big one, this one is the small one.’
- (38)  $\llbracket (37) \rrbracket^c = 1$  iff  $\text{this tree}_1 = \iota x[x \in \text{big}^{+,c}] \wedge \text{this tree}_2 = \iota y[y \in \text{small}^{+,c}]$

- Restated:
  - This  $\text{tree}_1$  is the unique individual in the positive extension of *wirijarlu* ‘big’ in  $c$
  - This  $\text{tree}_2$  is the unique individual in the positive extension of *wita* ‘small’ in  $c$
- The only two individuals in the extensions of ‘big’ and ‘small’ in  $c$  are this  $\text{tree}_1$  and this  $\text{tree}_2$ .  
 $\Rightarrow$  Accomplishes context restriction (§3; Kennedy 2007b) without explicitly manipulating the context parameter/variables, but instead appealing to Warlpiri-specific properties.
- Assuming Consistency Constraints, Warlpiri conjoined comparatives like (37) are predicted to be felicitous in crisp judgment contexts when the predicates are interpreted as definite descriptions.

- Explains acceptability in crisp judgment contexts while maintaining a degreeless analysis of Warlpiri, which accords with the morphosyntactic observations in Bowler (2016).

## 6. Cross-linguistic variation in conjoined comparatives

- Not much data available, but languages differ with respect to the availability of conjoined comparatives in crisp judgment contexts.
- Bochnak (2013, 2015): Like Warlpiri, Washo has conjoined comparatives and degreeless, vague property concepts, but Washo comparatives are unacceptable in crisp judgment contexts:

(39) Context: There are two pinecones. One is slightly bigger than the other.

# wí:diʔ behéziŋ-aʔ-š lák'aʔ wí:diʔ t'-í:yel-iʔ  
 this small-DEP-SR one this NMLZ-big-ATTR

Literally: 'This one is small, this one is big.' (Ryan Bochnak, p.c.)

- Bochnak (2013, 2015): Washo conjoined comparatives are conjunctions of positive predications; in crisp judgment contexts, neither individual "stands out" enough to license the positive predications.

(40)  $[[\text{(39)}]]^c=1$  iff this pinecone<sub>1</sub> counts as small in  $c \wedge$  this pinecone<sub>2</sub> counts as big in  $c$

- Like Warlpiri, Washo lacks determiners (Hanink 2020).
- Unlike Warlpiri, property concepts in Washo are typically verbs, although they can undergo nominalization (Bochnak 2013).

(41) mé:hu ʔil-káykay-iʔ-i

boy ATTR-tall-ATTR-IPFV

'The boy is tall.'

(Bochnak 2013, 161)

(42) mé:hu de-ʔil-káykay-iʔ k'-éʔ-i

boy NMLZ-ATTR-tall-ATTR 3-COP-IPFV

'The boy is tall.'

(Bochnak 2013, 162)

- As verbs, Washo property concepts cannot be interpreted definitively.
- My proposal predicts that Washo conjoined comparatives *could* be felicitous in crisp judgment contexts if both property concepts were nominalized and interpreted definitively.

### Norm-relatedness of property concept words

- Independently, Bochnak (2013, 2015) describes Washo property concept words as “obligatorily norm-related”; the heights of the individuals in (43) are evaluated against a comparison class of all adults, and the conjoined comparison is therefore false.
- (43) Context: Comparing a man who is five feet tall and a woman who is four and a half feet tall (i.e., both clearly fall under the negative extension of *tall*):
- #t'él:liwɰu de-ʔil-káykay-iʔ      k'-éʔ-i      daʔmóʔmoʔ  
 man      NMLZ-ATTR-tall-ATTR 3-COP-IPFV woman  
 de-ʔil-káykay-iʔ-e:s      k'-eʔ-aʔ-š  
 NMLZ-ATTR-tall-ATTR-NEG 3-COP-AOR-SR  
 Literally: ‘The man is tall. The woman is not tall.’      (Bochnak 2015, 17)
- Analogous examples are felicitous in Warlpiri; (26): *Liddy is tall, Judy is short* is acceptable even though Liddy normally falls into the negative extension of *tall*<sub>Warlpiri</sub>.
  - Warlpiri-like data is also available in Samoan (Austronesian; Samoa; Marsack 1975) and Patpatar (Austronesian; Papua New Guinea; Peekel 1909):
- (44) Context: “To indicate that the 85,000 ton Queen Mary is bigger than the 45,000 ton Aquitania, a Samoan of the old school would say...”
- Ua tele le Queen Mary, ua la’itiiti le Aquitania  
 is big the Queen Mary is small the Aquitania  
 ‘The Queen Mary is bigger than the Aquitania.’  
 Literally: ‘The Queen Mary is big, the Aquitania is small.’      (Marsack 1975)
- Not all conjoined comparatives are alike; there is variation in context restriction, which can affect acceptability in crisp judgment contexts.

## 7. Conclusion

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- Property concepts in Warlpiri and Washo have the same semantics; in both languages, they are Kleinian vague predicates.
- Warlpiri conjoined comparatives, unlike Washo, are felicitous in crisp judgment contexts, contrary to our understanding of positive vague predications (Graff 2000; Kennedy 2007b, 2011).
- Their acceptability is a result of:
  - Warlpiri property concept words are nouns
  - Phonologically null iota operator

⇒ Warlpiri conjoined comparatives presuppose that the positive and negative extensions of the vague predicates in a context contain only the two compared individuals.

- Conjoined comparatives in Warlpiri and Washo differ syntactically.
- Lesson for fieldworkers: Importance of looking at the broader grammar of the language, not just a single construction!

There is variation among the set of degreeless languages:

	Crisp contexts	Norm-related contexts	
Warlpiri	✓	✓	Bowler (2016)
Nez Perce	✓	✓	Deal and Hohaus (2019)
Washo	#	#	Bochnak (2013, 2015)
Motu	#	#	Beck et al. (2009); Villalta (2007)

- Even pragmatic comparatives can be felicitous in crisp judgment contexts.
- The availability of crisp judgments in a language is not necessarily a diagnostic of degreefulness.
- Instead, might hinge on:
  - Lexical category of property concepts
  - Availability of context restriction (e.g. ability to be interpreted definitely)

Thank you!

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