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MODAL COMPARISONS: TWO DILLETANTES IN SEARCH OF AN EXPERT*

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Abstract

We express our puzzlement over the role of the German comparative form “eher” in metalinguistic and modal comparisons. We can’t do this alone. We have data, we have observations, we have speculations, but we need you to tell us what to do with them. We want to sit down with you and work on this together.

The German word “eher” can express temporal comparisons roughly meaning “earlier than” or “before”:¹

- (1) Die Schildkröte war eher am Ziel als Achilles.
The tortoise was earlier at-the goal than Achilles

‘The tortoise reached the goal before Achilles.’

As happens all the time, “eher” has acquired uses beyond the temporal domain. One striking use seems to fall under what Morzycki (2011) classified as ‘metalinguistic’ comparisons:

- (2) Mein Auto ist eher flott als schnell.
My car is more cool than fast

‘My car is more on the cool side than on the fast side.’

*We have been puzzling over the role of “eher” in metalinguistic and modal comparisons for quite a while. We thank Chris Kennedy, Pete Klecha and Marcin Morzycki for conversations where we shared our bafflement with them. Elena Herburger and Aynat Rubinstein have independently embarked on a research project on “eher” (Herburger and Rubinstein 2014). This is not the time to compare our preliminary conclusions in any detail but we will draw on their WCCFL handout in a few places.

¹Etymologically, “eher” appears to be the comparative to an old Germanic word meaning “early”, cf. Gothic “air”, related to the Greek “ἠρι” ‘early, in the morning’ (see <http://www.dwds.de/?qu=eher>). The Southern German and Austrian adverb “eh” (‘anyway’) may be a backformation.

(3) Mein Auto war eher langsam als schnell.
 My car was more slow than fast
 ‘My car was more on the slow side than on the fast side.’

(4) Mein Auto war eher langsam.
 My car was more slow
 ‘My car was more on the slow side.’

(5) Mein Auto war eher langsam als dein Motorrad.
 My car was more slow than your motorbike
 ‘My car’s performance was a clearer case of slowness than your motorbike’s performance.’

According to Morzycki, ‘metalinguistic’ comparatives differ from ‘ordinary’ comparatives in relying on scales of imprecision or ‘pragmatic slack’ in the sense of Lasersohn (1999). There is a clear difference between ordinary comparatives and comparatives with “eher”: (6) and (7) do not mean the same.

(6) Ella ist grösser als Ginger.
 Ella is taller than Ginger

(7) Ella ist eher gross als Ginger.
 Ella is more tall than Ginger
 ‘Ella is a clearer case of tallness than Ginger.’

(7) doesn’t sound right if the two girls are both giants or dwarves (hence clear examples or counterexamples of tallness), or if one is a dwarf and the other is a giant, even if Ella is indeed taller than Ginger. For (7) to be acceptable, both Ella and Ginger have to be borderline cases of tallness. That’s a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. (7) is also unacceptable if Ella and Ginger are both borderline cases of tallness, but they are very close in height. Under those circumstances, (8) is unacceptable, too:

(8) Im Vergleich zu Ginger ist Ella eher gross.
 In comparison to Ginger is Ella more tall.
 ‘In comparison to Ginger, Ella is more on the tall side.’

If Ella and Ginger are very close in height, no reasonable way of making the predicate “tall” precise would place Ella in its positive and Ginger in its negative extension. Doing so would, in fact, violate the Similarity Constraint of Fara (2000), which Kennedy (2011) formulates as follows:

The Similarity Constraint. *When x and y differ to only a very small degree in the property that a vague predicate g is used to express, we are unable or unwilling to judge the proposition that x is g true and that y is g false.*

No such problem arises with the ordinary comparative in (6), which can be used even if the height difference is minuscule. Kennedy (2011) suggests that this feature of ordinary comparatives throws

doubt on a semantics for such comparatives that is based on theories of vagueness (such as the proposals by Kamp (1975), Klein (1980), van Rooij (2011)). We take no position on this quarrel. The point here is that “*eher*” comparatives differ strikingly from ordinary comparatives, and there is no question that mechanisms like vagueness resolution or pragmatic slack management play a role for the uses of “*eher*” illustrated in (2) to (8).

The difference between “*eher*” comparatives and ordinary comparatives also shows up with ‘non-gradable’ predicates. Predicates like “*schwanger*” (pregnant) or “*tot*” (dead) do not appear in the ordinary comparative. The absence of “*schwangerer*” (pregnant-er) may be partly because of the “*er*”-doubling but that can’t begin to explain the severe ungrammaticality of “*toter*” (dead-er):²

(9) ?*Ella ist schwangerer als Ginger.*
Ella is more pregnant than Ginger

(10) **Mein Patient ist toter als deiner.*
My patient is more dead than yours.

The “*eher*”-comparative is fine even with non-gradable predicates and as before, there is a metalinguistic comparison interpretation.

(11) *Ella ist eher schwanger als Ginger.*
Ella is more pregnant than Ginger
‘Ella is a clearer case of a pregnant woman than Ginger.’

(12) *Mein Patient ist eher tot als deiner.*
My patient is more dead than yours
‘My patient is a clearer case of a dead person than mine.’

In addition to temporal and metalinguistic interpretations, “*eher*” can also express what seem to be modal comparisons. In fact, all sentences we have looked at so far can have modal comparison interpretations. Consider (7), for example. Suppose you got to know Ella and Ginger as little girls and haven’t seen either one of them in many years. You are wondering what they may look like. Given that Ella’s parents were tall, but Ginger’s parents were not, you may say (7). What we have here is an epistemic comparison: the evidence supports the hypothesis that Ella is tall better than the hypothesis that Ginger is tall. In other words: Ella is more likely to be tall than Ginger. While the temporal interpretation feels clearly distinct from both the metalinguistic and the modal comparison interpretation of “*eher*”, there is a question whether the metalinguistic and modal comparison interpretations correspond to two genuinely distinct readings. This, then, is our first question:

Question 1. *Is “eher” genuinely ambiguous between a metalinguistic and a modal comparison reading?*

Our second question relates to what happens when “*eher*” appears in a sentence that already contains a modal expression. Here we are up for a surprise: (13), (14), and (15) are very close in

²Herburger and Rubinstein mark sentences like (9) with a star.

meaning, and seem to be truth-conditionally equivalent, even though (14) has a possibility modal, (15) has a necessity modal, and (13) has no overt modal at all.

- (13) Das ist eher eine japanische als eine chinesische Maschine.
This is more a Japanese than a Chinese machine.
'This is more likely a Japanese than a Chinese machine.'
- (14) Das kann eher eine japanische als eine chinesische Maschine sein.
This might more a Japanese than a Chinese machine be.
'This is more likely a Japanese than a Chinese machine.'
- (15) Das muss eher eine japanische als eine chinesische Maschine sein.
This must more a Japanese than a Chinese machine be.
'This is more likely a Japanese than a Chinese machine.'

Question 2. *How exactly does “eher” interact with overt or covert modals so as to deliver the truth-conditional equivalence of (13) to (15)?*

Our third and last question relates to subtle differences between modal comparisons with “eher” and modal comparisons with gradable adjectives like “likely”, “desirable”, or “feasible”.

- (16) a. Her moving to Paris is more likely than his leaving Rome (is).
b. Her moving to Paris is more likely than you think (it is).
c. His leaving Rome is more desirable than (it is) feasible.
- (17) Jockl kann eher in Aufhausen gewesen sein, als Jackl in Mindelheim.
Jockl can more in Aufhausen been be than Jackl in Mindelheim.
'Jockl is more likely to have been in Aufhausen than Jackl in Mindelheim.'
- (18) Jockl kann den Mord eher begangen haben als der Richter denkt.
Jockl can the murder more committed have than the judge thinks.
'Jockl is more likely to have committed the murder than the judge thinks.'
- (19) *Jockl wollte diesen Mord eher begehen als er konnte.
Jockl wanted this murder more commit than he could.
'Jockl was more desirous than capable of committing this murder.'

We have starred (19) to indicate that it cannot have a modal comparison reading. It does have a temporal reading (“the time such that Jockl wanted to commit the murder at that time was earlier than the time at which he was capable of committing it”). The puzzle is why the modal reading is absent in (19). (16c) shows that, in contrast, analogous cross-scalar modal comparisons are perfectly well-formed with gradable adjectives.

Question 3. *Why are modal comparisons with “*eh*er” more restricted than ordinary modal comparisons with gradable modal adjectives?*

We have no answers, which is why we need help from an expert on degree semantics. We could speculate and reveal our suspicions, but that may be even more embarrassing. Please join us and set us straight.

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