

# Waning and waxing

## The case of comparative marking in Tujia

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This paper provides a preliminary description of the comparative construction in Tujia<sup>1</sup> (northern dialect; NT), an endangered ergative Tibeto-Burman (TB) language spoken in China, in the context of the typologically diverse ways in which comparative meaning is expressed. In mono-clauses in NT, comparative marking depends on the position of the standard (i.e., that which is compared to). The standard may be marked with an ablative marker, or a topic marker if it appears in sentence-initial position due to left dislocation; otherwise, the comparandum (i.e., that which is to be compared) is assigned an ergative marker. Ergative on the comparandum and ablative on the standard can both occur but this is not obligatory. We propose that the ablative is the primary comparative marker in NT. However, this construction is subject to variation: the ablative marker is being replaced by a topic marker on the standard or by an ergative marker on the comparandum. We analyze this as change in progress (partly as a result of language contact); specifically, we propose that an ergative marker on the comparandum is starting to function as a focus marker, and in which the comparative meaning is derived from reanalysis. On the other hand, the comparative meaning in constructions where the standard is marked with a topic marker is proposed to result from the functional extension of the topic structure to comparative constructions. Both ergative marking on the comparandum and topic marking on the standard are typologically rare. Thus, the analysis of comparison marking in Tujia contributes to the typological understanding of comparative constructions in general.

**Keywords:** comparative marking, ablative marker, ergative marker, topic marker, Tujia

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1. Tujia (ISO 639-3, tjs (Southern), tji (Northern)) belongs to the Tibeto-Burman (henceforth: TB) language family, and is spoken in south-central China, in the border area of Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, and Guizhou Province. There are two dialects in Tujia: Northern Tujia and Southern Tujia.

## 1. Introduction

Comparative constructions<sup>1</sup> refer to a number of different conceptual and linguistic forms, and have been defined in various ways. Here we adopt the definition of comparative construction by Stassen (1985:24): “A comparative construction is one which has the semantic function of assigning a graded (i.e. non-identical) position on a predicative scale to two (possibly complex) entities.” We use the term “comparative construction” to refer to different types of constructions: (i) involving two entities X and Z and a quality or property, (ii) expressing inequality between X and Z, (iii) constructions involving a result rather than the process of comparison (cf. Andersen 1983:99–100).

The terminological framework used in this research is mainly based on Dixon (2008; 2012). The main terms are illustrated by the example sentence in (1):

- (1) *John is more intelligent than Paul*  
 comparandum index parameter marker standard

The term “comparandum” refers to what is being compared for some property, against some standard of comparison. The “standard” refers to what the comparandum is being compared with. The “marker” is the indicator of the grammatical function of the standard, e.g. *than* in English (1), or *bi* in Chinese (e.g., *Zhangsan bi Lisi shou* ‘Zhangsan is thinner than Lisi’). The “parameter” in (1) is the element that expresses the property that is being compared. Cross-linguistically, the parameter is typically expressed by an adjective, or a stative verb (with an adjective-like meaning) (Dixon 2008:787), but in some languages it may be an adverb (Andersen 1983:118), a noun (Ultan 1972:120), or a verb with the general meaning ‘to surpass’ (Greenberg 1966:88). Finally, the “index” marks the degree of presence of a property in the comparandum (in English: *more* or *-er*). See Treis (2018:ii) for detailed discussion of these terms.

In many languages, the marker on the standard constitutes the only formal expression of comparison, that is, there is no degree marker. In languages such as English, German, French, Russian, Hungarian, Samoan, and Kanuri, however, there is an obligatory degree marker (Heine 1997:110). All languages that have mono-clausal comparative constructions have comparanda, standards, and parameters, but indices and markers may or may not be present depending on the language (Jacques 2016:12).

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1. The main kinds of comparative notions are listed in Heine (1997:109). Comparative constructions can be understood in a narrow or a broad sense. In a broad sense, comparative constructions encompass equative, comparative, superlative, and other constructions. In the present research we focus on comparatives in the narrow sense.

A large variety of morphological and syntactic structures are employed in the languages of the world to express comparatives (Heine 1997: 111). To describe and explain these structures, different ways of classifying comparative constructions have been proposed. Stassen (1985; 2013) claims that there are five main types of comparative constructions based on marking of the standard: *separative*, *allative*, *locative*, *exceed*, and *conjoined* (Stassen 1985: 28–45). There is another type, which Stassen calls *particle comparative*, which is characterized by the presence of a specific comparative particle, which accompanies the standard NP, e.g. *than* in English.

From a cognitive point of view, Heine (1997: 111) claims that most comparative constructions in the languages of the world are derived from a limited number of conceptual source structures, which he refers to as event schemata, and he points out that the five schemata including *location*, *source*, *goal*, *action*, and *polarity* are relatively common sources for comparatives. Except for the particle comparative, all of Heine's types correspond to Stassen's *separative*, *allative*, *locative*, *action*, and *polarity* types (see Heine 1997: 109–130).

Cuzzolin & Lehmann (2004) specifically focus on the expression of the index. Based on the absence or the presence of a marker of comparison on the parameter, typically adjectives or adverbs, Cuzzolin & Lehmann (2004) subdivide the strategies of marking comparison into four main groups: (i) *no marker*, (ii) *optional lexical morpheme*, (iii) *affix*, and (iv) *surpass/overtake verb*. Different from the above, Dixon (2008; 2012) divides comparative constructions into eight types based on their morphosyntactic properties. The etymology or multifunctionality of the standard marker in comparative constructions is of little relevance for the establishment of his types.

Note that, given the types of classification above, there are no reports on how the comparandum is encoded. Marking on the comparandum is relatively rare, and – if it occurs, as in Japhug, a Tibeto-Burman language described by Jacques (2016) – it is referred to as a typological oddity (Jacques 2016; Treis 2018).

The encoding of the standard NP can be divided into fixed cases and derived cases, both of which can be further divided (Stassen 1985: 28, 149). In fixed-case comparative constructions, the standard NP can be treated as ablative, dative, or locative, where the ablative is most commonly found. These constructions treat the standard as a source ('from'), a goal ('to') or a static locative concept ('at', 'on', etc.) (Heine 1994: 59).<sup>2</sup> What these three sub-schemata have in common is that they conceptualize the standard in terms of relations that are essentially spatial in nature, irrespective of whether these relations are encoded

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2. Corresponding to Stassen's (1985: 31ff.) *separative*, *ablative*, and *locative* comparatives respectively.

by means of adposition, case inflection, or a verbal affix (Heine 1994: 56); see also Heine & Kuteva (2002: 30–31, 103, 201, 305–307). The ablative sub-schema is the most frequent one; in fact it accounts for almost one third of all sources for comparatives in the Stassen sample (see also Heine 1994: 59; Dixon 2008: 795). Sentence (2) is taken from Stassen (1985: 39):

- (2) Mundari<sup>3</sup>  
*Sadom-ete had mananga-i.*  
 horse-from elephant big-PRES.3SG  
 ‘The elephant is bigger than the horse.’ (Stassen 1985: 39)

Heine (1994: 65) points out that Asian languages are most likely to use the ablative sub-schema as its primary option.

This paper investigates mono-clausal comparative constructions in Northern Tujia, focusing on the variation of comparative marking. Comparative constructions in Tujia comprise five elements, corresponding to the standard, the comparandum, the parameter, the marker, and index. Both the index and the marker are expressed as grammatical particles. Only adjectives can form the parameters of comparison, and the index is obligatory in Tujia. The basic comparative construction in Tujia is [Comparandum + Standard + M(arker) + P(redicate) + Index (henceforth: [C+St+M+P+Index]), in which the standard is marked by the ablative marker *lie*<sup>55</sup> (3i). However, if the standard is left-located and appears in sentence-initial position, it is marked by the topic marker *mε*<sup>55</sup> (3ii), which – as we shall argue below – is an instantiation of a functional extension of the topic structure to comparative constructions. In other cases, the comparandum is marked by the ergative marker *ko*<sup>35</sup> (3iii), which, we argue, functions as a focus marker in comparative constructions, and the comparative meaning is derived from reanalysis and inference. Given the observation that the ablative *lie*<sup>55</sup> is less frequent than either the ergative or the topic marker, and the fact that the ablative and the ergative can co-occur, we claim that the ablative *lie*<sup>55</sup> is disappearing in favor of *ko*<sup>35</sup> (ergative) and *mε*<sup>55</sup> (topic). An overview of the constructions which Tujia utilizes to express comparative meaning is presented in (3).

- (3) Comparative construction in Tujia
- i. [C+St+*lie*+P+Index] (*lie* is an ablative marker)
  - ii. [St+*mε*+C+P+Index] (*mε* is a topic marker)
  - iii. [C+*ko*+St+P+Index] (*ko* is an ergative marker)

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3. Mundari is a Munda language of the Austro-Asiatic language family spoken by the Munda tribal people in east India, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Marking the standard with an ablative is widely attested, while marking the comparandum with an ergative is not. The Topic Schema is not common either (Stolz 2013: 13–14, Footnote 23). This warrants an investigation of the variety of comparative constructions in Tujia, so that a deeper understanding of the relations between them could contribute to the existing typology of comparative constructions. Secondly, as we shall see, language variation and change are involved in how comparative meaning is construed, and the investigation of this aspect adds to the growing literature on grammaticalization in this research area.

The organization of this paper is as follows. §2 introduces some basic grammatical properties of Tujia. In §3 we point out three types of strategies used to mark mono-clausal comparative constructions. §4 provides an analysis to explain the mechanisms behind these strategies. §5 provides concluding remarks.

There are two dialects in Tujia: Southern Tujia and Northern Tujia. Southern Tujia is very much influenced by Mandarin Chinese (Li 2000). The present research is restricted to Northern Tujia. Unmarked data below is from our fieldwork in two villages, Baoge and Pojiao, conducted between 2014 and 2021 (all data will be made available online in a data repository). We thank our native experts Yingguang Liu, Shiping Xiang, Chune Peng and Xiuzhen Tian.

Two main data collection approaches have been used in our investigation: translation and elicitation. Specifically aiming at finding out about comparatives in Tujia, our informants were asked to translate Mandarin Chinese sentences into Tujia, or vice versa. We also prepared some situations in which two entities were shown and the informants were asked to compare the size or other properties of the two entities or to comment on the inferiority of either of the two.

## 2. Basic syntactic properties of Tujia

Tujia is a highly endangered language (Dai & Tian 2005). The basic word order in Tujia is SOV. The object can be left-located for pragmatic purposes. Nominalization is widely used, and can be divided into derivational and clausal nominalization. Four nominalizers are applied: *tsi*<sup>21</sup>, *ma*<sup>55</sup>, *jie*<sup>53</sup>, and *ei*<sup>55</sup>. *tsi*<sup>21</sup> and *ma*<sup>55</sup> are used for special purposes, where [V + *ma*] indicates persons, and [V + *tsi*] indicates things. Nominalized elements with *ei*<sup>55</sup> refer to something or some person; it is a general marker. *jie*<sup>53</sup> is a genitive marker and can also be used as a nominalizer (Lu et al. 2019a).

Tujia is a topic-prominence language. A topic element is marked by *me*<sup>55</sup>. A noun phrase or a clause can function as a topic, as illustrated below:

- (4)  $\eta a^{35} m\epsilon^{53} p^h o^{35} ka^{55}$ .

1SG TOP teacher

‘I am a teacher.’ (Lit. ‘In terms of me, I am a teacher.’)

A verb phrase must be nominalized before it is used as a topic. A topic marker can co-occur with a nominalization marker:

- (5)  $xu^{53} ts^h a^{21} \epsilon i^{55} m\epsilon^{55} \eta a^{35} a^{35} tsi^{21} tsi^{21} nau^{21} t^h au^{35}$ .

run NMLZ TOP 1SG like NMLZ one.CLF NEG.PRF

‘I like running very much.’

There is no copula in Tujia. A noun phrase can be used as a predicate. See (6).

- (6)  $\eta a^{35} p^h o^{35} ka^{55}$ .

1SG teacher

‘I am a teacher.’

An agent can be but is not obligatorily marked by an ergative marker. The use of the ergative marker is closely related to perfectivity, agency, telicity, affectedness of the object, and other factors (Lu et al. 2019b). Sentence (7) is taken from Lu et al. (2019b: 52).

- (7) a.  $\eta a^{35} (ko^{35}) kai^{35} ts^h i^{21} p^h u^{21} pa^{55} liau^{21}$ .

1SG ERG DEM book read PRF

‘I did the reading.’ or ‘I have finished reading the book.’<sup>4</sup>

- b.  $\eta a^{35} ko^{35} kai^{35} ts^h i^{21} p^h u^{21} pa^{55} t\epsilon i^{21} liau^{21}$ .

1SG ERG DEM book read finish PRF

‘I finished reading the book.’

Generally, the ergative  $ko^{35}$  is obligatory when both the agent and the patient are animate nouns.  $ko^{35}$  is used to identify the agent. In other cases when there is no ambiguity in semantic roles,  $ko^{35}$  is optional. For instance, in Sentence (7a), which element is the agent is a matter of common sense, and hence the ergative is optional. However, other factors will affect the use of  $ko^{35}$ . See (7b), where the telic marker  $t\epsilon i^{21}$  ‘finish’ is used, and the ergative is preferred.  $ko^{35}$  is used to emphasize agency.

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4. Sentence (7a) has two interpretations, while (7b) has only one. The difference is due to whether the aspectual particle  $t\epsilon i^{21}$  is used or not. In (7b), this aspectual particle is used, and the sentence has only one interpretation, viz. that the whole book has been read. In (7a), on the other hand, this particle does not appear, and the sentence merely means that the action of reading the book has been terminated, but it does not necessarily mean that the whole book reading procedure has been finished.

Generally the subject of an intransitive verb is not marked by any case. But in certain situations, it can be marked by an ergative marker; for instance, it is used to highlight the subject. See (8) for illustration, taken from Lu et al. (2019b).

- (8) *po*<sup>55</sup>*li*<sup>21</sup> *ko*<sup>35</sup> *nie*<sup>35</sup>*p*<sup>h</sup>*ie*<sup>55</sup> *liau*<sup>21</sup>.  
 child ERG sleep PRF  
 ‘The child has fallen asleep.’

In (8), the verb *nie*<sup>35</sup>*p*<sup>h</sup>*ie*<sup>55</sup> ‘sleep’ is intransitive. The subject NP is marked by *ko*<sup>35</sup>, which functions as a focus marker. Sentence (8) may be appropriate in a situation, for instance, in which there are three or four children in a family. A father has just got home from outside and wants to have a talk with one of his sons. If the mother replies using (8), with *ko*<sup>35</sup> in the sentence, her emphasis is that “The child you want to talk to has fallen asleep; it is not possible for you to have a talk with him now.” If *ko*<sup>35</sup> is not used, there is no such emphasis. More detailed introduction of the use of the ergative *ko*<sup>35</sup> will be provided in §4.3.

There are no adverbs to indicate the meaning of degree. The meaning of degree is expressed through a degree construction which makes use of nominalization (Lu et al. 2021: 426, 428). See (9)–(10).

- (9) *kai*<sup>35</sup> *zo*<sup>55</sup> *ji*<sup>35</sup> *t*<sup>h</sup>*o*<sup>21</sup> *xie*<sup>21</sup> *ei*<sup>21</sup> *xē*<sup>55</sup> *liau*<sup>21</sup>.  
 DEM field one CLF sink NMLZ much SFP  
 ‘This field is sinking seriously.’ (Lit. ‘This field’s sinking is very much.’)  
 (Tian et al. 1986: 102)

- (10) *nai*<sup>53</sup> *sa*<sup>53</sup> *ei*<sup>21</sup> *t*<sup>h</sup>*ai*<sup>35</sup>.  
 today cold NMLZ EXIST.NEG  
 ‘Today is very cold.’ (Lit. ‘There is no coldness as there is today.’)  
 (Braslett et al. 2006: 2)

### 3. Comparative constructions in Tujia

Both mono-clausal and bi-clausal comparative constructions occur in Tujia. In a bi-clausal comparative construction, the comparative meaning is expressed by two adjectives with contrastive meaning. See (11) (more examples of comparative constructions are given below):

- (11) *wo*<sup>53</sup>*t<sup>h</sup>a*<sup>53</sup> *t<sup>h</sup>oŋ*<sup>35</sup>*tɛ<sup>h</sup>ian*<sup>53</sup> *ni*<sup>55</sup> *ɛi*<sup>55</sup> *zi*<sup>53</sup> *nie*<sup>53</sup>. *ts<sup>h</sup>u*<sup>55</sup> *nie*<sup>21</sup> *t<sup>h</sup>oŋ*<sup>35</sup>*tɛ<sup>h</sup>ian*<sup>53</sup> *ni*<sup>55</sup>  
 outside money earn NMLZ much INDEX home GEN money earn  
*ɛi*<sup>55</sup> *p<sup>h</sup>u*<sup>55</sup>*ts<sup>h</sup>i*<sup>53</sup> *nie*<sup>53</sup>.  
 NMLZ little INDEX  
 ‘Working outside (in big cities) earns more than working at home (in a small village).’  
 (Lit. ‘Working outside (in big cities) earns much; working at home (in a small village) earns little.’)

In (11), the two adjectives are *zi*<sup>53</sup> ‘much’ and *p<sup>h</sup>u*<sup>55</sup>*ts<sup>h</sup>i*<sup>53</sup> ‘little’ respectively, used in two clauses. The index *nie*<sup>53</sup> occurs in both of the sentences in final position and has been analyzed in different ways: we shall present our own interpretation later in § 3.1. Here we just point out that *nie*<sup>53</sup> functions as an index in comparative constructions.

In the present paper we limit our discussion to mono-clausal constructions, where the marking can either appear on the standard or on the comparandum, depending on the location of the standard.

### 3.1 [C+[St+lie]+P+Index] (*lie* is an ablative marker)

In languages where the standard is marked, the standard marker typically has additional functions such as ablative, locative, or genitive marker (Andersen 1983; Heine 1997; Cuzzolin & Lehmann 2004; Dixon 2008). Using the ablative case construction is a very common means of expressing comparison (Andersen 1983: 119; Heine 1997: 115; Cuzzolin & Lehmann 2004: 1212). The use of the ablative to mark the standard can also be observed in Tibeto-Burman languages. The sentences in (12)–(13) are from Tshangluo Monpa, taken from Zhang (1986: 115).

- (12) Tshangluo Monpa  
*tɛaŋ*<sup>13</sup> *Me*<sup>13</sup>*to*<sup>55</sup> *ɛen*<sup>55</sup> *kai*<sup>13</sup> *u*<sup>55</sup>*p<sup>h</sup>a*.  
 1SG placename city ABL come  
 ‘I come from MeTo.’ (Zhang 1986: 115)
- (13) Tshangluo Monpa  
*tɛaŋ*<sup>13</sup> *roŋ*<sup>13</sup> *kai*<sup>13</sup> *lak*<sup>13</sup>*taŋ*<sup>55</sup> *pet*<sup>13</sup>*pe*<sup>55</sup> *wu*<sup>13</sup>*wa*.  
 1SG 3SG ABL more early get up  
 ‘I get up earlier than her.’ (Zhang 1986: 115)

Tujia also makes use of this strategy, as shown in (14)–(18), where *lie*<sup>55</sup> is an ablative, in Sentence (14) it is used in its lexical sense, while in (15)–(18), *lie*<sup>55</sup> is used to mark the standard, and the sentences convey comparative meaning.



- (14)  $\eta a^{35}$   $Chang^{35}$   $sha^{55}$   $lie^{55}$   $en^{21}$   $tʃi^{21}$ .  
 1SG placename ABL come  
 ‘I come from Changsha.’
- (15)  $a^{21}$   $ta^{53}$   $\eta a^{35}$   $lie^{55}$   $ze^{53}$   $nie^{53}$ .  
 elder sister 1SG ABL beautiful INDEX  
 ‘My elder sister is more beautiful than I.’
- (16)  $kai^{35}$   $jan^{21}$   $pi^{35}$   $la^{35}$   $tʃi^{55}$   $ai^{55}$   $la^{35}$   $tʃi^{55}$   $lie^{55}$   $ɣi^{35}$   $nie^{53}$ .  
 DEM pen one.CLF DEM one.CLF ABL long INDEX  
 ‘This pen is longer than that one.’
- (17)  $kai^{53}$   $se^{21}$   $k^he^{55}$   $la^{55}$   $k^he^{21}$ ,  $ai^{35}$   $se^{21}$   $k^he^{55}$   $la^{55}$   $k^he^{21}$   $lie^{55}$   $\epsilon in^{35}$   $ka^{55}$   $nie^{53}$ .  
 DEM field one.CLF DEM field one.CLF ABL green INDEX  
 ‘This field is greener than that one.’
- (18)  $ki^{55}$   $tse^{55}$   $en^{35}$   $ki^{21}$   $po^{55}$   $ɣi^{35}$   $nie^{55}$   $\epsilon i^{55}$ ,  $an^{35}$   $ɳi^{55}$   $ki^{21}$   $po^{55}$   $ɣi^{35}$   $nie^{55}$   $\epsilon i^{55}$   $lie^{55}$   $tɕian^{35}$   
 3PL there GOL go NMLZ 1PL there GOL go NMLZ ABL easy  
 $nie^{53}$ .  
 INDEX  
 ‘Going to their place is easier than to our place.’

In (14),  $lie^{55}$  ‘from’ is used to mark the noun phrase  $chang^{35}sha^{55}$ , expressing the source of movement, while in (15)–(18) the comparandum is located in subject position followed by the standard which is marked by the ablative  $lie^{55}$ . Literally, the sentences can be generalized as *X is Adj.<sup>5</sup> from Y*. For instance, Sentence (15) can be paraphrased as ‘My elder sister is beautiful from me’, similarly, Sentence (16) amounts to saying ‘This pen is long from that one’. The same interpretation can be extended to (17)–(18). Stassen (1984) claims that, semantically speaking, comparison in such constructions seems to be “metaphorized” as a movement in which the object represented by the standard NP is conceived of as the point of origin (Stassen 1984: 151). The facts of Tujia support this claim and we propose that the standard NP marked with an ablative can be interpreted as the source on the basis of which the comparandum is compared.

Cross-linguistically, the source schema is one of the most widespread sources for comparatives, if not the most widespread (Heine 1997: 115). It appears in close to half the languages of Ultan’s (1972: 130–131) sample and almost a third of the languages in Stassen’s (1985) sample. In the latter sample, all three Asian languages (Hindi, Kashmiri, and Tajik) are characterized by the use of the ablative sub-schema. In Dixon’s (2008) sample of 30 languages, more than half of

5. There is no morphology to indicate whether an element is an adjective or not in Tujia. Whether an element is adjective or not depends on its syntactic location.

the markers are ablatives, glossed as ‘from’. Heine (1994) claims that areal distribution rather than genetic relationship is crucial in determining the choice of event schemata (see also Leyew & Heine 2003; Stolz 2013). “Given some random Asian languages, chances are highest that it uses the Source Schema as its primary option” (Heine 1997: 128). Tujia conforms to Heine’s prediction.

In many languages, the mark on the standard constitutes the only formal expression of comparison; that is, there is no degree marker (Heine 1997: 110). In languages such as English, German, French, Russian, Hungarian, Samoan, and Kanuri, however, there is an obligatory degree marker. All languages that have mono-clausal comparative constructions have comparanda, standards, and parameters, but indices and marks may or may not be present depending on the language (Jacques 2016: 12). In Tujia, the index *jie*<sup>53</sup> is obligatory.

Note that Li & Lu (2013: 58) point out that sentence final *jie*<sup>53</sup> in (15)–(18) can be treated as a comparative marker. We refer to it as an index. *jie*<sup>53</sup> is always located in sentence-final position, functioning as a sentence-final particle. Semantically, it plays the role of *more* or *-er* in English, or *yixie* ‘some’ in Mandarin Chinese. It is not used to mark either the comparandum or the standard. *jie*<sup>53</sup> forms a constituent with the parameter, witnessed by the fact that no elements can intervene between *jie*<sup>53</sup> and the parameter.

To complete this part of the exposition, we point out that the particle *jie*<sup>53</sup> is multifunctional. It can be used as a numeral meaning ‘two’, but it can also be used as a conjunction, used to link two nouns, as in *wu*<sup>35</sup> *jie*<sup>53</sup> *zo*<sup>35</sup> ‘cattle and sheep’, [*xa*<sup>53</sup>*lie*<sup>21</sup> *so*<sup>55</sup> *long*<sup>55</sup>] *jie*<sup>55</sup> [*mo*<sup>53</sup> *ze*<sup>55</sup> *long*<sup>55</sup>] ‘three dogs and four cats’, i.e., some type of grammaticalization may be involved here. We assume that the development of *jie*<sup>53</sup> started out from the numeral *jie*<sup>53</sup> ‘two’, then it came to be used as a linking word, similar to ‘and’ before it came to be used as an index. This is possible. According to Heine & Kuteva (2002), an index or a standard marker in a comparative construction may start out with a non-comparative meaning. Wang (2020: 26) points out that the conjunction *lian* is derived from *lia* (two + classifier) in Mandarin Xining dialect. Similar observation is also made in Bonan Language (Chen 1987: 121) and Mongolian (Hasbatar 2001). However, since there are no historical sources in the case of Tujia, the assumed path for *jie*<sup>53</sup> must for now remain conjectural.

### 3.2 [[C+ ko] +St+P +Index] (*ko*<sup>6</sup> is an ergative marker)

In existing typological studies on comparative constructions, most analyses focus on the standard, while the comparandum has received relatively less attention. In general, marking on the comparandum is referred to as a typological oddity (Jacques 2016; Treis 2018). Jacques (2016) observes that in Japhug, another TB language, the ergative marker *kuu* is used to mark the comparandum.

Let us point out that marking the comparandum with an ergative can be observed in other TB languages. For instance, in Loloish (also called Yi) languages, the comparandum is marked by the particle *ta*<sup>337</sup> (Hu 2005; Liu et al. 2013), as illustrated by (19), taken from Hu (2005: 40).

- (19) Liangsha Loloish  
*ŋe*<sup>33</sup>*ma*<sup>55</sup>      *ta*<sup>33</sup> *vr*<sup>55</sup> *mo*<sup>31</sup> *tɕo*<sup>44</sup>*a*<sup>31</sup>*tsh*<sup>33</sup> *mu*<sup>33</sup> *ndza*<sup>55</sup>.  
 younger sister M    old sister INDEX            ADV beautiful  
 ‘(My) younger sister is more beautiful than my elder sister.’      (Hu 2005: 40)

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6. There are some points to note about ergative marking on the comparandum. At the beginning of our field work, our informants, without exception, marked *ko*<sup>35</sup> on the comparandum. However, as the investigation went on, they would confuse the marking on the standard and the comparandum, and they would stop asking if it was the comparandum or the standard that was predicated before they translated the Chinese into Tujia. On these occasions, they would always say things like this to themselves, “our (word) order is different from Chinese”. Then they started to left-locate the standard and mark the standard with the ergative instead of the comparandum. Our interpretation of this observation is that at the beginning our informants translated the meaning purely on intuition. However, as they got confused they began to translate the sentences intentionally on the basis of their knowledge that word order in Tujia (SOV) is the opposite of Mandarin Chinese (SVO). They mistakenly put the ergative marker on standards which were left-dislocated. Given this observation, we take the marking on the comparandum as the authentic Tujia strategy. Our informants say that both ergative marker and the ablative can co-occur. However, this does not seem right, since it is not possible to mark the comparandum with two case markers. It is also impossible to mark the standard with the ergative given the observation that the ergative can be used as a focus marker (Lu et al. 2019b). Furthermore, marking *ko*<sup>35</sup> on the comparandum is also reported elsewhere in the literature. So the present paper bases its data both on our field work and existing literature.

7. Here our point is that marking the comparandum is not an isolated phenomenon in TB languages. Yi provides such an example. We are not saying that *ta*<sup>33</sup> is an ergative marker, and so we simply use M(ark) in the gloss as cited from Hu (2005). Besides, in Dai & Hu (1998), *ta*<sup>33</sup> is multifunctional, one of its functions being locative marker. As is known, there is a close relationship between locative marker and ergative marker. Detailed analysis, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Hu (2005) does not provide much detail about the function or interpretation of the marker *ta*<sup>33</sup> in Sentence (19). What is relevant to the present investigation is that marking the comparandum is also possible in Tujia. In Sentences (20b)–(21), the comparandum is located in sentence-initial position and is marked with the ergative marker *ko*<sup>35</sup>.

- (20) a. *ŋa*<sup>35</sup> *ko*<sup>35</sup> *ɛi*<sup>55</sup> *pa*<sup>55</sup> *tɕa*<sup>35</sup> *tɕi*<sup>21</sup> *liau*<sup>53</sup>.  
 1SG **ERG** clothes wash finish PRF  
 ‘I have finished washing the clothes.’  
 b. *a*<sup>35</sup> *ta*<sup>55</sup> *ko*<sup>35</sup> *ŋa*<sup>35</sup> *ze*<sup>53</sup> *nie*<sup>53</sup>.  
 elder sister **ERG** 1SG beautiful INDEX  
 ‘(My) elder sister is more beautiful than me.’
- (21) *ŋa*<sup>35</sup> *a*<sup>21</sup> *k<sup>h</sup>o*<sup>55</sup> *ko*<sup>35</sup> *ŋa*<sup>35</sup> (*lie*<sup>55</sup>) *so*<sup>55</sup> *se*<sup>55</sup> *t<sup>h</sup>on*<sup>21</sup> *tɕi*<sup>53</sup> *nie*<sup>53</sup>.  
 1SG brother **ERG** 1SG ABL three years old INDEX  
 ‘My brother is three years older than me.’

We illustrated the use of *ko*<sup>35</sup> as an ergative marker in §2. Sentence (20a) serves as further illustration. In the sentences in (20b) and (21), however, *ko*<sup>35</sup> is used to mark the comparandum, and the sentences can only be interpreted with a comparative meaning. The same observation is also reported in Tian et al. (1986), Luo et al. (2001: 112), Zhou (2013: 81), and Wei (2012: 52). We shall return to this analysis in §4.3.

In §3.1, we showed that the standard is marked by an ablative. Naturally, the question arises as to whether *ko*<sup>35</sup> and *lie*<sup>55</sup> can co-occur. The answer is “yes”. One of our informants tells us that the co-occurrence of *ko*<sup>35</sup>...*lie*<sup>55</sup> is acceptable though it is not obligatory, as shown by the sentence in (21), where the brackets indicate that the use of *lie*<sup>55</sup> is optional.

The fact that an ergative marker is used to produce comparative meaning is rarely observed. The relevant question is: How can we explain the mechanisms behind this marker? We shall return to this in §4.

### 3.3 [[St+ mɛ]+C+P+Index] (*mɛ* is a topic marker)

In §2, we mentioned that Tujia is a topic-prominent language and the topic marker is *mɛ*<sup>55</sup>. Here we point out that in comparative constructions, the standard can be fronted and located in sentence-initial position, but there its marking will change. We can see this in (22)–(24), where the standard is not marked with the ablative *lie*<sup>55</sup>, but with the topic marker *mɛ*<sup>55</sup>.

- (22)  $\eta a^{35} m\epsilon^{55} a^{35} ta^{55} ze^{53} nie^{53}$ .  
 1SG TOP elder sister beautiful INDEX  
 ‘(My) elder sister is more beautiful than I.’
- (23)  $an^{55} \eta ai^{55} m\epsilon^{55} a^{21} k^h o^{55} so^{55} se^{55} t^h on^{21} ts^h i^{53} nie^{53}$ .  
 young brother TOP old brother three years old INDEX  
 ‘(My) elder brother is three years older than my younger brother.’
- (24)  $ki^{53} tse^{21} nie^{53} ts^h o^{53} m\epsilon^{55} an^{35} \eta i^{55} ts^h o^{53} tian^{35} ts^h i^{53} nie^{53}$ .  
 3PL GEN house TOP 1PL house a bit big INDEX  
 ‘Our house is a bit bigger than theirs.’

In these sentences the standard is left-dislocated to sentence-initial position and is marked with the topic marker  $m\epsilon^{55}$ . Sentence (22) is interpreted as ‘in terms of me, my elder sister is beautiful’ = ‘My elder sister is more beautiful than I.’ In Sentence (23), the measure phrase  $so^{55} se^{55} t^h on^{21}$  ‘three years’ is added to the sentence. In Sentence (24), the measure phrase  $tian^{35}$  ‘a bit’ is used. Similar observations are reported in Xiang (2011: 148) and Brassett et al. (2006: 75).

That the marker on the standard would change after dislocation is unexpected. In many other TB languages, a topic marker may combine with an ablative after the standard has been left-located. See the Tibetan sentences in (25) and (26), from Li (2018: 375) and Shao (2012: 30), respectively.

- (25) Nujiang Lisu (lisu1250)  
 $A^{55} na^{33} t^h \epsilon^{31} s l^{33} ni \epsilon^{33} A^{55} p^h u^{33} t^h i^{31} t^h u^{33} mo^{44}$ .  
 PN on TOP PN one MC height  
 ‘In comparison with Ana, Apu is 20 centimeters taller.’ (Li 2018: 375)
- (26) Classical Tibetan (clas1254)  
 $da ro-las-bltasna ni \eta am t\epsilon^h u \eta rma-las-bltasna p^h ogs \eta a$   
 DEM corpse-M-look TOP weak wound-M-look like scar  
 $t\epsilon^h e-zing-mt\epsilon^h iis-na$ .  
 big-LNK-EXIST  
 ‘(I) am weaker than a corpse, the scar is bigger than a wound.’ (Shao 2012: 30)

Li (2007: 76) points out that the mark in TB languages functions so as to subordinate the standard, and the position of the standard does not affect its marking. Tujia seems an exception to this, however, since marking on the standard varies according to its location. After left-dislocation, it is marked by a topic marker and not by a combination of ablative and topic marker. This will be analyzed in § 4.

It is possible to have partial constructions with only the comparandum, where the elided element is anaphorically linked to a previously mentioned referent. For instance, in daily conversation, the standard is often deleted.

- (27) *ko*<sup>35</sup> *sa*<sup>55</sup> *noŋ*<sup>53</sup> *po*<sup>55</sup> *ɛi*<sup>55</sup> / *po*<sup>55</sup> *la*<sup>21</sup>      *zi*<sup>53</sup>    *nie*<sup>53</sup>.  
 3SG duck raise    DUR.NMLZ/DUR.RLS many INDEX  
 ‘The ducks he raises are more (than mine).’

In Sentence (27), the standard is deleted, since both speakers know what it is.

To summarize, we have presented three different ways of marking the comparative construction in Tujia. We have shown that speakers can either mark the standard with an ablative case when it follows the comparandum, or as a topic when it is left-located; or the comparandum can be marked with an ergative when it is in sentence-initial position. In a single language, different ways of marking are applied to produce comparative meaning. The relevant questions are: Are there any distributional differences among these markers? How are these different markers assigned? Are there any relations among these markers? In the next section, we shall address these issues and point out that these ways of marking comparative constructions can be seen as an instantiation of gaining and losing linguistic functions in language change. Crucially, the alternating constructions are attributed to language-internal change.

#### 4. Waning and waxing in language variation: The case of comparative marking in Tujia

Languages are always changing and grammaticalization plays a major role (Lehmann 1985:310–311; Heine & Stolz 2008:326, among others). Changes happen slowly and gradually. Quite often language change is a process in which one form dies and another one comes into existence (Lehmann 1985:310–311). In between these endpoints, there will be a period during which the old and the new forms co-exist. Later on, the old form gradually disappears and if the new form is commonly used it becomes the only acceptable form (see also Cao 2004). Thus, the process can be seen as waning and waxing in language change: forms are lost, gain new functions, or may appear in new guises. In what follows we provide an analysis showing that the variation of the marking of comparative construction in Tujia illustrates such waning and waxing in language. Our approach is based on the idea that in Tujia the ablative marker is being replaced by the topic marker or the ergative marker. The two processes are triggered by functional extension: In the case where the Ablative is replaced by Topic, the process resulted from the functional extension of topic structure to comparative construction: both the Topic and the Ablative share the function as setting a starting point; in the case where the Ablative is replaced by the Ergative, the process resulted from the func-

tional extension of ergative marker: the ergative is extending its function as a focus marker marking the comparandum as a contrastive focus.

4.1 The disappearance of the ablative in comparative constructions

In this section we provide answers for the three questions we asked in §3.3: Are there any distributional differences among these markers? How are these markers assigned? Are there any relations among these markers? As for the first question, our answer is negative: There is no difference in distributional restrictions among these three markers, but there do seem to be dialectal differences. Among these three markers, *ko*<sup>35</sup> (Ergative) is mainly used in Pojiao village, *me*<sup>55</sup> (Topic) mainly occurring in Baoge village. *lie*<sup>55</sup> (Ablative) is acceptable in either area. However, there are preferences among these markers. In our sample of 75 sentences containing comparative constructions from Baoge village and Pojia village, we found that the frequency of occurrence of the ablative *lie*<sup>55</sup> in Pojiao is 8 times, 5 in Baoge, respectively. *lie*<sup>55</sup> occurs in both Pojiao and Baoge, while *ko*<sup>35</sup> occurs 60 times, only in Pojiao. *me*<sup>55</sup>, 58 times, only occurs in Baoge. We present the frequency of the different markers we have observed in Table 1.

Table 1. The frequency of use of different comparative markers in Tujia<sup>8</sup>

	Pojiao	Percentage	Baoge	Percentage
<i>lie</i> <sup>55</sup>	8	10% (8/75)	5	7% (5/75)
<i>ko</i> <sup>35</sup>	60	80% (60/75)	0	0
<i>me</i> <sup>55</sup>	0	0	58	77% (58/75)
<i>pi</i>	11	14% (11/75)	10	13% (10/75)
Total	75		75	

Table 1 shows that *lie*<sup>55</sup> is least frequent among the three markers. There is no big frequency difference between the ergative and the topic marker (77% and 80%, respectively). The use of the topic marker and the ergative marker thus shows an areal difference. Speakers from Pojiao tend to use the ergative marker, and speakers from Baoge prefer the topic marker. We therefore interpret this as a dialectal

8. We have three consultants for each dialect, the examples in both dialects using the same translation. The examples elicited were provided in the same context. We furthermore asked our consultants to describe the situation involving comparison, which we have purposefully designed.

difference. Note that in either village, the loan form *bi* from Mandarin Chinese can be observed.

Besides this, we also observed that the ablative is mainly used by elderly speakers: the ergative or the topic constructions are rarely observed among people under 60 years old. Therefore, we suggest that the ablative *lie*<sup>55</sup> as a comparative marker is disappearing in Tujia. There are three arguments for this view: The first is simply that *lie*<sup>55</sup> is much less frequent than *ko*<sup>35</sup> or *mε*<sup>55</sup> (Table 1). Second, the co-occurrence of *ko*<sup>35</sup>... *lie*<sup>55</sup> can be seen as reflecting an intermediate period before *lie*<sup>55</sup> disappears and will tentatively be completely replaced by *ko*<sup>35</sup>. Third, *lie*<sup>55</sup> is sometimes combined with the loan form *bi* from Chinese,<sup>9</sup> which can be considered further support for this variable situation. See (28)–(30).

- (28) *ɲi*<sup>35</sup> *ɲie*<sup>53</sup> *pi*<sup>55</sup> *ko*<sup>35</sup> *ɲie*<sup>53</sup> *tsʰa*<sup>35</sup> *ɲie*<sup>53</sup>.  
 2SG GEN PTCL 3SG GEN good INDEX  
 ‘Yours is better than his.’
- (29) *ɲa*<sup>35</sup> *ɛi*<sup>55</sup> *tsʰa*<sup>53</sup> *ɛi*<sup>21</sup> *pi*<sup>55</sup> *ɲi*<sup>35</sup> *lie*<sup>55</sup> *kʰuai*<sup>35</sup> *ta*<sup>55</sup> *ɲie*<sup>53</sup>.  
 1SG run NMLZ PTCL 2SG ABL fast INDEX  
 ‘I run faster than you.’
- (30) *ɲa*<sup>35</sup> *ko*<sup>35</sup> *pi*<sup>55</sup> *a*<sup>55</sup> *ɲai*<sup>55</sup> *lie*<sup>55</sup> *si*<sup>55</sup> *ɲie*<sup>53</sup>.  
 1SG ERG PTCL young brother ABL fat INDEX  
 ‘I am fatter than my young brother.’

In (28)–(30), the Chinese particle *bi* (transliterated as *pi*<sup>55</sup> in Tujia) can optionally co-occur with *lie*<sup>55</sup>. We suggest that the presence of *pi*<sup>55</sup>...*lie*<sup>55</sup> is due to the fluidity of an intermediate stage before *lie*<sup>55</sup> disappears, and *ko*<sup>35</sup> or *mε*<sup>55</sup> occurs. *pi*<sup>55</sup> is the particle used to form comparisons in Chinese, like English *than*. In (29)–(30), the standard is double-marked by both a preposed and a postposed morpheme. We can also regard this as grammaticalization in progress, understood as a process in which lexical items in certain contexts gains a grammatical function, or in which a grammatical item becomes even more grammatical. This process is gradual, so that transitions sometimes lead to the coexistence of elements or overlaps (cf. Lehmann 1985; Heine 1994; Heine & Kuteva 2002; Hopper & Traugott 2003). We suggest that the co-occurrence of *pi*<sup>55</sup>...*lie*<sup>55</sup> and *ko*<sup>35</sup>... *lie*<sup>55</sup> represents such an overlapping stage.

9. In Mandarin Chinese, the comparative construction is [C+*bi*+St+P], as in ‘I am older than you’, *bi* in the sentence is a preposition, functioning as a comparative marker, marking the standard.



## 4.2 From topic structure to the comparative construction

In §3.3, we showed that when the standard is left-dislocated in a comparative construction, it is marked with a topic marker and the original ablative marker on the standard is absent. In TB languages, the dislocation of the standard does not change its marking (Li 2007: 67). Consider examples from Lisu in (31), repeated from (25), taken from Li (2018: 375), and from Amdo Tibetan in (32), repeated from (26), taken from Shao (2012: 30).

- (31) Nuijiang Lisu (lisu 1250) (= (25))

$A^{55}na^{33} t^h\epsilon^{31} s_l^{33} nie^{33} A^{55}p^hu^{33} t^hi^{31} t^hu^{33} mo^{44}$ .

PN on TOP PN one MC height

'In comparison with Ana, Apu is 20 centimeters taller.' (Li 2018: 375)

- (32) Classical Tibetan (clas 1254) (= (26))

$da$   $ro-las-blta\textit{na}$   $ni$   $\eta am t\epsilon^hu\eta$ ,  $rma-las-blta\textit{na}$   $p^hogs\eta a$

DEM corpse-M-look like TOP weak wound-M-look like scar

$t\epsilon^he-zing-mt\epsilon^hiis-na$ .

big-LNK-EXIST

'(I) am weaker than a corpse, and the scar is bigger than a wound.'

(Shao 2012: 30)

In the above two sentences, the standard is located in sentence-initial position, and marked both with a topic marker and a comparative mark.

The observation that marking on the standard in Tujia varies according to its position in the sentence is not expected. How can we explain this phenomenon?

Given these observations for Lisu and Tibetan, which are both TB languages, we may conclude that there are two possibilities. On the one hand, we can imagine that, originally, both the ablative marker and the topic occurred on the standard. What happened was that the ablative marker on the standard disappeared in the process of grammaticalization. If that is the case, it supports Li's (2007) claim that dislocation does not affect the marking of the standard (Li 2007: 76). However, since Tujia is not a written language, there is no documentation for earlier stages of the language. We therefore leave this as an open possibility.

A second possibility involves a scenario in which the topic marker has replaced the ablative marker and functions as a comparative mark. To support this conjecture, we first introduce some relevant observations. Sentences in (33a) and (33b) are from Liu (2012: 3).

## (33) Mandarin Chinese (mand1415)

- a. *baihuo da-lou jiage bi nimen di.*  
 grocery building price M 2PL low  
 'In the grocery building the price is lower than yours.'
- b. *jiage baihuo da-lou bi nimen di.*  
 price grocery building M 2PL low  
 'In the grocery building the price is lower than yours.' (Liu 2012: 3)

In (33a), the noun *jiage* 'price' is the subject of the predicate, but it is not the comparandum, while the sentence-initial noun phrase *baihuo dalou* 'grocery building' is the comparandum, but it is not the subject of the sentence, and has no selectional relation with the predicate (parameter). The standard is the second person pronoun *nimen* 'you-PL', which also has no selectional relation with the predicate. The sentences in (33) show that in Mandarin both the comparandum and the standard are freer than those in other languages, in the sense that they do not have to have a lexical selectional relation with the predicate. In Mandarin Chinese, both comparandum and standard have topic properties. The sentences in (34) show that both the comparandum and the standard can be topicalized in this language.

## (34) Mandarin Chinese (mand1415)

- a. *ta fangzi bi wo gui.*  
 3SG house M 1SG expensive  
 Lit. 'He/She house is more expensive than me.'  
 = 'His/Her house is more expensive than mine.'
- b. *fangzi ta bi wo gui.*  
 house 3SG M 1SG expensive  
 Lit. 'house he/she is more expensive than me.'  
 = 'His/Her house is more expensive than mine.' (Liu 2012: 3)

Note that the fact that both the comparandum and the standard do not have to have a selectional relation with the predicate is not allowed in other languages. For instance, in English, Sentence (35b) is incorrect.

- (35) a. His house is more expensive than mine.  
 b. His house is more expensive than me\*/I\*.

Since in Chinese, there is no requirement that the comparandum function as the subject of the predicate and the standard in Mandarin enjoys more freedom than in languages like English, this makes it possible for the topic construction to extend its function to the comparative construction (Liu 2012:7). There is a close similarity between topic construction and comparative construction in Mandarin Chinese, comparative meaning can be expressed by a topic construc-

tion (Liu 2012: 7). The expression of comparative meaning results from the functional extension of the topic construction. However, Liu does not clarify what is meant by “functional extension of the topic structure”.

In the present paper we point out that a topic construction used to expressing comparative meaning is related to the core function of the topic construction. A topic is typically a noun phrase (or a verb phrase) that expresses what the sentence is about—a topic is definite or generic, occurs in sentence-initial position, and may be followed by a pause or a pause particle (Li & Thompson 1989: 87; Gundel 1999: 197). Similarly, Krifka (2008: 265) argues that the topic is the entity that a speaker identifies about which information is given (also see Davison 1984: 809; Chafe 1987: 22). Based on these definitions of Topic, we conclude that the core function of Topic can be seen as setting the “starting point or baseline” of a conversation.

Morev (1998) points out that a comparison cannot be performed without fulfilling two prerequisites. One is that there should be a basis in common; this means that the objects have to be compatible, with respect to a feature of distance, size, position, etc. The other is that there should be at least three positions on the scale of comparison: a starting point and two or more points oriented to the starting point. If there are two or more objects endowed with a certain feature but there is no starting point, then a comparison cannot be made because either one of them could be taken as the point of reference. When for instance, we set out to compare objects in respect to a certain feature, one of them, the object of comparison, is always marked as being a certain distance from zero, with the starting point as zero (Morev 1998: 91).

Let us return to the relation between topic and comparison. According to our analysis, a topicalized element sets the starting point, to which a sentence adds information. It is in this sense that it is treated as the standard. The topic is the person or item that is the “baseline” or “standard”: this is then compared to another person or item (also see Brassett et al. 2006: 75).

To see that this observation is not confined to Tujia, consider the fact that in some other Chinese dialects, too, comparative meaning is produced through topicalization on the standard without the presence of a comparative marker. The sentences in (36a) are from Tiantai and (36b) from Shaoxing dialects (both of the Wu language family) (Dai 1999: 258).

- (36) a. TianTai (Wu) (wuch1236)  
*Xiaowang shi Xiaoli chang.*  
 PN TOP PN long  
 ‘Xiaoli is taller than Xiaowang.’ (Dai 1999: 258)

- b. Shaoxing (Wu) (wuch1236)

*hɔ̌ dauləu zɿ gei khua.*

1SG run TOP 3SG fast

(Lit.) 'I running, he faster' = 'His running is faster than me' = 'He runs faster than I do.'

(Adapted from Dai 1999: 258)

*Shi* 'be' is a copular verb in Wu dialects, like it is in Chinese, but in Tiantai it can also function as a topic marker following the standard. The sentences in (36) express comparative meaning. Sentence (36a) amounts to saying 'in terms of Xiangwang, Xiaoli is taller'; similarly, Sentence (36b) amounts to saying 'in terms of my running, he is faster'.<sup>10</sup> The cases we have observed in Tujia behave like that of the Tiantai dialect, where the standard is topicalized and is treated as a standard.

Note that the core function of the ablative marker is to encode adjuncts expressing source and origin of an action, i.e. the starting point of an action. If the above considerations are on the right track, we claim the use of Topic to replace ablative can also be unified: both provide a starting point. Note that since both the comparandum and the standard can be topicalized, according to Liu (2012), it is possible that the comparandum is topicalized. If that is the case, it seems to provide a counterargument to our analysis. However, this does not in fact happen: In Chinese, the comparative marker encoding the standard will co-occur with the Topicalized element. See the sentences in (37)–(38), from Han & Shi (2021: 35).

- (37) Shanghai (Wu) (shan1293)

*wo ne, pi yi haiyao gengjia wasai.*

1SG TOP PTCL 3SG even more dismayed

'I am more dismayed than him.'

(Han & Shi 2021: 35)

- (38) Shanghai (Wu) (shan1293)

*wo ne, pi yi ne, haiyao gengjia wasai.*

1SG TOP PTCL 3SG TOP even more dismayed

'I am more dismayed than him.'

(Han & Shi 2021: 35)

In (37), the comparandum *wo* 'I' is located in sentence-initial position, and marked as a topic. In (38), both the comparandum *wo* 'I' and the standard *yi* 'him' are marked by the topic marker *ne*. In both sentences, the comparative marker *bi* is applied.

10. Note that in Mandarin Chinese and in many other dialects, there is no marker for event nominalization. Sentence (36) is such an example, where the nominalized element *taole* is not marked. Also, note that the genitive is often omitted, especially in colloquial language.

This is also observed in TB languages. In TB languages there are also cases in which either the standard or the comparandum can be marked with a topic marker. This occurs, for instance, in Lahu (Li 2011:23); Darang (Jiang et al. 2013:219); Zaiwa (Zhu 2011:298); Nusu (Sun & Liu 1986); Jingpo (Dai & Xu 1992); Sangkong (Li 2002); classical Tibetan (Shao 2012). See (39)–(41).

(39) Classical Tibetan (clas1254)

*da ro-las-bltasna ni namtɛ<sup>h</sup>uŋ rma-las-bltasna p<sup>h</sup>ogsŋa*

DEM corpse-M-look like TOP weak wound-M-seem scar

*tɛ<sup>h</sup>e-zing-mtɛ<sup>h</sup>iis-na*

big-CONJ-have

‘(I) am weaker than a corpse, and the scar is bigger than a wound.’

(Shao 2012: 30)

(40) Darang (diga1241)

*a<sup>31</sup>ba<sup>35</sup>je<sup>55</sup> a<sup>31</sup>ma<sup>55</sup> qoŋ<sup>33</sup> ku<sup>31</sup>nuŋ<sup>55</sup> ha<sup>55</sup>luŋ<sup>55</sup> ma<sup>31</sup>lu<sup>55</sup> ta<sup>31</sup>tsai<sup>55</sup> joŋ<sup>53</sup>*

father TOP mother DIR years ten more old PRF

‘My father is ten years older than my mother.’

(Jiang et al. 2013: 219)

(41) Lahu (lahu1253)

*yuu<sup>31</sup> ve<sup>33</sup> lɛ<sup>33</sup> xɔ<sup>31</sup> ve<sup>33</sup> kɛ<sup>35</sup> dɔ<sup>31</sup>.*

smile NMLZ TOP cry NMLZ more good

‘Smiling is better than crying.’

(Li 2011: 23)

In (39), repeated from (25), the comparandum in the first sentence is omitted, and the standard is marked both by a comparative marker and a topic marker (Shao 2012: 30). In Sentences (40–41), the comparanda are marked with a topic marker and the standards are marked with either a comparative marker or a directive preposition which functions as such.

To sum up, we have provided an analysis showing that topic construction is extending its function to comparative construction. In sentences with a comparative marker, both the comparandum and the standard can be topicalized, and the standard is distinguished from the comparandum by the comparative marker, while in cases where there is no comparative marker, the topicalized element is treated as a default standard. The reading of comparative meaning derives from the inference in the sense that both the topic and the ablative share the core function of providing the “starting out” position for comparison. The sentence is described as [X TOP, Y+P+Index]: When it comes to X, Y is more P. The comparative meaning is thus derived from inference.

Stolz (2013) claims that Topic Comparatives are not widely attested (Stolz 2013: 13–14, Footnote 23). Given the observations for Tujia, many other TB languages, Chinese, and Chinese dialects, this claim should be modified.

Heine (1994) holds that areal distribution plays a major role in the cognitive patterning underlying the development of comparative constructions in the languages of the world (Heine 1994:66). Along the same lines, Stolz (2013:1) also points out that areal diffusion via language contact is one of the decisive factors which can be held responsible for the competition of several comparative constructions in one and the same language. In the case of Tujia, we think that possibly the change is induced by language contact. As has been shown, the function of topic structure is on its way of being extended to comparative construction. However, given the fact that there is no documentary evidence for the language, it is hard to prove that the use of TOP in comparative constructions was influenced by Mandarin Chinese, by other languages, or is an independent development. We leave this an open question.

### 4.3 From ergative marker to a focus marker

A comparandum in sentence-initial position, marked as an ergative, is indeed rare in TB languages. According to our knowledge, there are only two languages which are reported to mark the comparee: one is Loloish (Yi) (Hu 2005; Liu et al. 2013); another is Japhug (Jacques 2016). Zhou (2003:239) observes that in Amdo Tibetan, an ergative is used on the standard, rather than on the comparandum. Using the same marker on the comparandum NP and the Agent is typologically rare (Jacques 2016; Treis 2018).

Neither Hu (2005) nor Liu et al. (2013) provides an analysis of the marking on the comparandum in Yi. Jacques claims that the use of *kuu* in comparative constructions in Japhug is derived from the *kuu* in adversative constructions with an adjective (referred to as a “parameter” in our analysis) in both clauses, in which the first adjective is negated (42a) (Jacques 2016:11, 27). This construction is a variant of Stassen’s (2013) “conjoined comparative”. The sentences in (42a)–(42b) are taken from Jacques (2016:11, 27).

(42) Japhug, Rgyalrong (japh1234)

- a. *u-jwaʁ nu ra ɪzora ji-paχei* [*st<sup>h</sup>uci muu-nuu-ɣrtum*]  
 3SG.POSS-leaf DEM PL 1PL 1PL.POSS-apple so.much NEG-SENS-be.round  
*kuu muu-rɲji tsa.*  
 ? SENS-be.long little

‘Its leaves are not as round as those of the apples of our (country), but are rather a little long.’

- b. [*u-jwaʁ nu ra*] *kuu muu-rɲji tsa.*  
 3SG.POSS-leaf DEM PL ? SENS-be.long little

‘Its leaves are rather a little long’ → ‘Its leaves are a little longer.’

(Jacques 2016:11, 27)

According to Jacques (2016: 11, 27), the use of *kui* in comparative constructions has appeared in three stages. In the first stage, *kui* occurs in an adversative construction (42a). In the second stage, the first clause in the adversative construction was elided, presented in (42b), where *kui* was introduced by reanalysis and reinterpreted as having syntactic scope over the constituent directly preceding it; i.e., the noun phrase corresponding to the S of the verb in the next clause. From there, it could be generalized to the complete comparative construction where the comparandum is marked with the comparative marker (Jacques 2016: 27). A more detailed analysis of the grammaticalization pathway of *kui* in Japhug is referred to Jacques (2016: 11, 27).

We propose that the mechanism of marking the comparandum with an ergative marker in Tujia is different from that in Japhug. We argue that the ergative marker in a comparative construction functions as a focus marker. *ko*<sup>35</sup> indicates the comparandum as the contrastive focus – it is compared with another element, the standard. The comparative meaning is inferred from the focus structure. The structure can be described as: [C+focus]+St+P+Index, and the sentence is interpreted like this: “In comparison with the standard, it is the comparandum that is P(arameter).” So it is reanalyzed like this: “In comparison with the standard, the comparandum is more P(arameter).” The grammatical path of the ergative marker in Tujia is therefore different from that in Japhug.

First, *ko*<sup>35</sup> in Tujia is also multifunctional. *ko*<sup>35</sup> may be used to disambiguate semantic roles. It may be used both with transitive verbs and with intransitive verbs. Factors like animacy, aspect, telicity also affect the use of the ergative marker. In some cases, *ko*<sup>35</sup> may be used to emphasize agency, to highlight an Actor, or to make an Actor prominent. In other cases, *ko*<sup>35</sup> is used to focalize an Actor, to foreground participants in a discourse context, or to express unusual or unexpected behavior on the part of some Actor (Lu et al. 2019b). For a detailed analysis of the use of *ko*<sup>35</sup> we refer to Lu et al. (2019b). Here we restrict our concern to one of the functions of *ko*<sup>35</sup>: viz. its use as a focus marker. Sentence (43) is taken from Lu et al. (2019b: 58).

- (43) *nie*<sup>21</sup>*pa*<sup>21</sup> *ko*<sup>35</sup> *ŋa*<sup>35</sup> *a*<sup>35</sup> *ei*<sup>55</sup> *ta*<sup>35</sup>, *ŋa*<sup>35</sup> *to*<sup>21</sup> *e*<sup>55</sup> *lie*<sup>55</sup> *ka*<sup>21</sup> *sa*<sup>21</sup> *li*<sup>21</sup>.  
 parents ERG 1SG teach NEG 1SG REFL smart LNK song sing  
 ‘It is not my parents who taught me to sing, but I am talented in singing.’

In (43), *ko*<sup>35</sup> follows the subject in the first part of the sentence, and it functions as a focus marker. In the second part of the sentence, the reflexive marker *to*<sup>21</sup> is also used to emphasize the subject. The use of *ko*<sup>35</sup> and *to*<sup>21</sup> in these two phrases both serve to emphasize the subject in the two parts and forming a contrast between the two.

In a discussion of the word order of comparison, Friedrich (1976) emphasizes the importance of comparandum (which he refers to as pivot), while Andersen (1983: 107) maintains that the subject has absolutely nothing to do with the word order of the comparison: "... we should be interested in the order of elements within a constituent – in this case an AP – and the subject certainly does not belong to this constituent." We do not agree with Andersen's claim. The observations from Tujia, Japhug, Tibetan, and Yi show that comparanda do participate in the creation of the comparative meaning. The comparandum does affect the word order in the comparison. If comparative constructions form a constituent, the comparandum must be one of the members of the constituent, as Friedrich (1976: 467) observes:

A basic source of confusion has been the focus on the two variables of adjective and standard ... If we include the variables of Pivot and Marker, as would Greenberg ... What we obviously need is a full-scale comparative study of comparison in all the stocks, taking Pivot and Marker fully into account and relating the results to what is known typologically and in terms of the logic of comparison.

Andersen (1983) observes that in some languages there are secondary constructions, i.e., constructions which have developed from primary constructions but which no longer preserve their primary morpho-syntactic features. This can be seen in Old Indic, where one very common means of expressing comparison is by an ablative case construction: earlier stages of this type of construction for comparison are still found (Andersen 1983: 119). The facts of Tujia provide a further illustration of this.

To account for the rise and development of grammatical categories, several motivating forces have been proposed. Such changes are "to be creative" (Heine et al. 1991: 55; Heine 1994; Heine & Stolz 2008) and "to be expressive" (Lehmann 1985: 315), to name but a few factors. In this respect, too, the changes taking place in marking comparative constructions in Tujia seem to be typical developments.

If so far we are on the right track, we would suggest that comparative marking in Tujia is developing along two paths as a result of the disappearance of the ablative: on the one hand, the ergative marker is extending its function to focus marker, and on the other hand, the topic construction is extending its function to the comparative construction. As noted before, the extension of the topic construction may result from language contact: Tujia is located in an area surrounded by Chinese and its dialects, while the use of the ergative marker on the comparandum is motivated by the development of ergative marker into focus marker.



## 5. Conclusion

Comparative constructions are used to make a comparison between two entities for some property. Generally, the standard is marked as a subordinate element, and the comparandum is the subject of the sentence. Originally, Tujia must have been like most other languages, in the sense that the standard is marked as an oblique (type A2 in Dixon (2008)). However, what is different is that Tujia is experiencing a change from marking the standard with ablative to marking it with a topic marker. This may result from the dislocation of the subject and the extension of the function of topic structure to comparative constructions as a kind of reanalysis. On the other hand, marking the comparandum is also a variable development that is taking place. The two processes derive from reanalysis and inference, two of the most important motifs in language variation and change.









Tujia is an endangered language, and many of its properties have been lost or are on their way to being lost. However, some demises in the grammatical system may be accompanied by the emergence of new forms. Comparative marking in Tujia thus illustrates an instantiation of waning and waxing in language variation.




## List of abbreviations

1	first person	MC	measure classifier
2	second person	NEG	negation
3	third person	NMLZ	nominalization
ABL	ablative	NT	Northern Tujia
ADV	adverbial	PL	plural
CLF	classifier	PN	proper noun
CONJ	conjunction	POSS	possessive
DAT	dative	PRES	present tense
DEM	demonstrative	PRF	perfective
DIR	directive	PTCL	particle
DUR	durative	REFL	reflexive
ERG	ergative	RLS	realis
EXIST	existential	SENS	sensory
GEN	genitive	SFP	sentence final particle
GOL	goal	SG	singular
INDEX	index of comparison	TB	Tibetan Burman
LNK	linker	TOP	topic
M	Marker of comparison		

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