A note on Pseudo-comparative sentences like
"John is rich like X!" and *"like X, John is rich!"* *

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Abstract. The title of this paper contains two types of sentences which show drastically opposite illocutionary acts of denial (of John's wealth) and exclamatory emphasis (on John's wealth). This paper attempts to explore the linguistic and pragmatic processes which could account for their different origins by drawing on the notions of pseudo-comparative sentences and Modus Tollens, and by fruitfully exploring them in the contexts of English and Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese). We show that gradability of attributes could account for differences between the opposite illocutionary forces in English, and that the addition of identity of the attributes being compared could account for differences in English and Chinese. Furthermore, other factors such as different epithets and their use as well as their infixation in disyllabic words could account for some usual differences between Mandarin and Cantonese.

Keywords: Pseudo-comparative sentences, denial, illocutionary force, expletives, profanities

1. Relationship between syntactic negation, pragmatic denial, and Modus Tollens

Increasing interest has been drawn to the use of language in context, especially the analysis of illocutionary force. In this paper I hope to draw attention to the use of a range of expressions whose variable syntactic order conveys obvious meaningful differences.

Take the following as a conversational exchange between speakers A and B.

1.   A: John is rich.

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* This is a continuation of discussions on some issues first raised in my paper "Linguistic structure beyond grammar: pseudo-conditionals, pseudo-comparisons, speech acts and language teaching" in Working Papers in Language and Linguistics No 1, Department of Applied Linguistics, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, 1989, pp.26-39. That paper was based on my earlier manuscript entitled "The grammar of profanity and the profanity of grammar" which in turn drew inspiration from James McCawley's paper: "English sentences without overt grammatical subjects" [under the nom de plume: Quang Phuc Dong from the "South Hanoi Institute of Technology" and dated Feb 1967] and subsequent discussions with him. James McCawley has been a giant in the field of logico-semantics in America and elsewhere, while Professor Akira Ikega has a similar position in Asia and has been a dedicated patron of PACLIC It is only befitting that this feeble attempt on a relevant topic be offered to honor both.

B could respond in the affirmative or negative:

2.   B: (a) Oh yes, John is rich !   (affirmative)
          (b) Oh no, John is not rich ! (negative)

(2b) is B's simple negation of (1) by pragmatically not accepting the truth value of the proposition contained in (1), or by B disagreeing or denying the truth value of the proposition in (1). In Table 1 below, there are examples of other utterances which carry the illocutionary force of denial in their respective sentences.

3. John is rich, like I am the Queen of Sheba !
4. John is rich, like I am a monkey's uncle !
5. John is rich, like I am the Premier of China !
6. John is rich, like the sun sets in the East !
7. John is rich, like hell !

Table 1: Some Pseudo-comparative sentences

These sentences generally may have a phonological juncture after *rich*, especially for emphasis, when *just* may ironically be inserted after the pause. It is notable that while all sentences in Table 1 have the same speech act function of denial as (2b), yet none of them overtly contains a negative marker. So it would seem that an overt negative marker is not the exclusive means to put forward opposing propositions.

What is of special interest is that sentences such as (3) to (7) are grammatically complex comparative sentences wherein attributes of two propositions in the first and second constituent sentences are being compared. However, these are not normal but pseudo-comparative sentences.

For the sentences in Table 1 under discussion, we can designate A to represent the proposition "John is rich" and B to represent a range of proposition(s) such as those contained in the second constituent sentences.

A two-step logical deduction is called for: The two propositions A and B are being equated with respect to some attribute in the pseudo-comparative sentences. This equated attribute allows for comparison and pragmatic manipulation by means of logical reasoning uniquely incorporated into the human communication chain. Thus assuming B is not true, then A is also not true (Modus Tollens or Modus Tollendo Tollens: *the mood that by denying denies*). This means, for example, in (3), since there was only one unique Queen of Sheba in Biblical times, the speaker could not conceivably be assumed to be the Queen of Sheba[1]; so there is inherent falsehood in the second proposition, and hence the first proposition is also false by Modus Tollens. When A is said to be like B, then some attribute of A is expected to be found in B, but the converse case is not necessarily true. In this case, the wealth of A is not being compared with the wealth of the Queen of Sheba (which would be conceivable), but with the speaker's identity as the Queen of Sheba!

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[1] unless the utterance is made in the make believe world of the theatre by an appropriate actress. It is interesting to note that Sentence 3 to 6 are sometimes uttered with a wink among Americans to convey the pragmatic nuance of these unusual comparative sentences.

A is like B
If A, then B
Not B
Therefore, not A

The force of denial in these sentences is ultimately based on similarly infelicitous non-compatibility between the implied attributes for comparison:

Wealth vs *improbable regal existence*   (Sentence 3);
Wealth vs *undesirable simian ancestry*   (Sentence 4);
Wealth vs *unlikely China premiership*   (Sentence 5);
Wealth vs *unscientific and impossible sun setting*   (Sentence 6);
Wealth vs *undesirable hellish conditions*   (Sentence 7);

2. Some linguistic features of Pseudo-comparative sentences

Let us further observe some unusual syntactic properties of the above sentences, which justify their being classified as "pseudo-comparative sentences". [2]

Consider some familiar and culturally bound examples:

8a. John is rich like Mary is beautiful
8b. John is as rich as Mary is beautiful

We could have a comparative degree variant for it:

9. John is more rich than Mary is beautiful

There is in (8a), (8b) and (9) an implied notional comparison of the extent or magnitude of two distinctly different but related attributes: *wealth* vs *beauty*, which is possible in English sometimes, but not in other languages, such as Chinese, where only the magnitude of the same attribute may be compared. Thus (8c), (9a) and (9b) are not grammatical in Chinese but (9c) to (9d) are.

8c. *Zhangsan   youqian   (de) gen Mali yiyang meili   (Mandarin)
      *張三   有錢   (得) 跟 瑪莉 一樣 美麗
       Zhangsan   -has money-DE-with-Mali-same-beautiful
      "Johnson is rich like Mary is beautiful"

9a. *Zhangsan   youqian   bi   Mali haiyao meili   (Mandarin)
      *張三   有錢   比   瑪莉 還要 美麗
       Zhangsan   -has money-compare-Mali-more-beautiful
      "Johnson is more rich than Mary is beautiful"

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[2] The term "pseudo-comparative" used here differs from that in Croft & Alan (2004).

9b. *Zoengsaam   jaucin   (dak)   tung Mary jatjoeng gam leng   (Cantonese)
  *張三   有錢   （得） 同 瑪莉 一樣 咁 靚
  Zoengsaam - has money-DAK-with-Mary-same-   like-beautiful
  "Johnson is rich, like Mary is beautiful"

9c1. [Z-S]   bi   Mali   youqian   (Mandarin)
  張三   比   瑪莉 有錢
  [Z-S]   - compare-Mary-has money
  "Johnson is more rich than Mary"

9c2. [Z-S]   jaucin   gwo   Mary   (Cantonese)
  張三   有錢   過   瑪莉
  [Z-S]   -has money-exceed-Mary
  "Johnson is more rich than Mary"

9d1. [Z-S]   gen Mali yiyang youqian   (Mandarin)
  張三   跟 瑪莉 一樣 有錢
  [Z-S]   -with-Mali-same-has money
  "Johnson is as rich as Mary"

9d2. [Z-S]   tung Mary jatjoeng jaucin   (Cantonese)
  張三   同 瑪莉 一樣   有錢
  [Z-S]   -with-Mary-same-has money
  "Johnson is as rich as Mary"

Furthermore, in English the following sentences would be pragmatically problematical:

10.*John is more rich than I am the Queen of Sheba
11.*John is more rich than I am a monkey's uncle
12. *John is more rich than I am the Premier of China
13.*John is more rich than the sunset of the East

This is simply because *rich* and *beautiful* are gradable attributes, whereas *regal existence*, *simian bloodties*, *premiership of China* and *direction of sunset* are non-gradable, and in English only gradable, though not identical attributes, may be compared. On the other hand, in Chinese only *both* gradable and identical attributes may be compared. Thus, by comparison and as can be expected, no similar pseudo-comparative Chinese sentences for (10) to (13) are conceivable.

We can note further that in some dialects of East coast American English, the order of constituent sentences can be readily reversed to project the same illocutionary force of denial:

14. Like I am the Queen of Sheba, John is rich !
15. Like I am a monkey's uncle, John is rich !
16. Like I am the premier of China, John is rich !
17. Like the sunset in the East, John is rich !
18. Like hell, John is rich !

While no similar constructions are found in Chinese, there are nonetheless pragmatically equivalent or even similar constructions.

19. [Z-S]   youqian,   ni   zuzong nainai !   (Mandarin)
    張三   有錢,   你   祖宗 奶奶！
     [Z-S]   -has money, your-ancestor-grandmother
     "Johnson is rich, my grandfather's mustache!"

20. [Z-S]   youqian   wo jiu shi husuan !   (Mandarin)
    張三   有錢,   我 就 是 胡孫 ！
    [Z-S]   -has money, I-then-am-monkey
    "Johnson has money, I am a monkey's uncle!"

21. Zhuzong   nainai   de, [Z-S]   youqian   (Mandarin)
    祖宗   奶奶   的, 張三   有錢 ！
    Ancestor-grandmother-DE, [Z-S]   -has money
    "My grandfather's mustache, Johnson is rich!"

22. (?) Ngo (zau)   hai   malou, [Z-S]   jaucin.   (Cantonese)
    (?) 我 (就) 係 馬騮, 張三 有錢
       I-   (then-)am- monkey, [Z-S]   has money
    (?) "I am a monkey's uncle, (then) Johnson is rich!"

23. [Z-S]   jaucin,   gwai (me).   (Cantonese)
    張三   有錢,   鬼 (咩)
    [Z-S]   has- money, devil- (SFP)[3]
    "Like hell, Johnson is rich!"

24. Gwai   me,   [Z-S]   jaucin   !   (Cantonese)
    鬼   咩, 張三   有錢   ！
    Devil-PART, [Z-S]   has money
    "Johnson is rich like hell!"

25. [Z-S]   , gwai   me,   jaucin !   (Cantonese)
    張三,   鬼 咩,   有錢 ！
    [Z-S]   - devil- PART-has money
    "Johnson is rich, no surprise!"

26. [Z-S]   jau gwai (X) cin !   (Cantonese)
    張三   有 鬼 (X) 錢 ！
    [Z-S]   - has- devil- (X)- money
    "Johnson has no S- money at all !"

These equivalent constructions are quite likely derived from pseudo-conditional sentences (see Tsou 1989)[4].

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[3] The use of epithetee (鬼 *gwai* 'devil' in Cantonese) is relatively culture bound. Additional body parts related to reproductive organs are commonly used in addition to 鬼 'devil'. Other languages such as English and Japanese could include similar epithets.

[4] There are also dummy expressions such as "says who" which has the same illocutionary force of denial as "like hell". Such an epithet stresses the pragmatics of speech act and further supports the speech act approach taken in this study.

3. From Exclamatory Denial to Superlative Intensifier

It would seem from the comparison of English and Chinese that Chinese has more stringent restrictions on the nature and typological compatibility of attributes being matched in (pseudo-) comparative sentences. Furthermore, while there is evidence that modus tollens has been idiomaticized in English to convey denial in pseudo-comparative sentences, we can see from the previous examples that the Chinese language does not seem to make use of the same approach in quite a comparable way in pseudo-comparative sentences, but pseudo-conditional 就 'then'. Furthermore Cantonese differs from Mandarin.

When the epithet "like hell" is not preposed as in (7) and used in a single utterance with no phonological juncture, then there is no denial but emphatic stress on the extreme extent of gradable attribute, such as *rich*, implying almost the superlative degree of comparison.

This process is relatively productive:

27. John is rich like hell

28. John is rich like anything

29. John is rich like Fort Knox
30. John is rich like Bill Gates

With the possible exception of (27) and (28) these examples seem to be normal comparative sentences in which the magnitude of the attribute *wealth* is compared between two parties. Sentence (27) and (28) may be accounted for by recalling that in English the magnitude of different attributes can be compared. Thus the extent of John's wealth could be compared with possibly the intensity of "(purgatorial?) heat or punishment" with an added measure of contempt or displeasure (27). This analysis seems supported by the use of the dummy epithet "like anything" ("The joker is wild perhaps") in sentence (28) and that "like anything" cannot be preposed as in (18) to convey denial.

Our analysis would account for the two different sources of illocutionary forces for *like hell*. It is important to note again that such relatively idiomaticized expression makers have become conventionalized epithets and are culturally bound.[5]

Furthermore, the derivation of "like hell" in (27) is very different from (7), as analyzed in section 1.

In Chinese, there are similar linguistic provisions but Mandarin differs from Cantonese.

30. [Z-S]   ta ma   de neiyang youqian   (Mandarin)
    張三   他 媽   的 那樣   有錢
    [Z-S]   -his-mother- de-similar-has money
    "Johnson is rich like hell !"

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[5] In English, instead of "like hell", other expressions such as *like my hat, like my foot, like my eyes, like my ass, ……* may be used. In Chinese, culturally-bound expressions which may be used are different, among dialects

31. [Z-S]   hou gwai (gam)   jaucin   (Cantonese)
    張三   好 鬼 咁   有錢
    [Z-S]   -very-devil-   similar-has money
    "Johnson is rich like hell !"

32. [Z-S]   hou gwai X (gam) jaucin   (Cantonese)
    張三   好 鬼 X 咁   有錢
    [Z-S]   -very-devil-X- similar-has money
    "Johnson is rich like f- hell !"

33.[Z-S]   gwai gam (X) jaucin   (Cantonese)
    張三   鬼 咁 (X) 有錢
    [Z-S]   -devil-like-X- has money
    "Johnson is rich like hell !"

X = expletive or profanity. Its use indicates extreme contempt (in contrast to more disdainful reaction with the use of 鬼 *gwai* . It may be placed just before the underlying adverbial 咁 *gaam* 'like' or even before 鬼 *gwai*.

It is clear from these examples that through the insertion of expletive or profane expressions as adverbials in Mandarin and Cantonese, the magnitude of the underlying linguistic gradable attribute has been emphatically marked. The emphasis could include an element of contempt or displeasure, especially when an additional expletive is involved. The superficial links to comparatives are tenuous and show little productive derivation but more readily frozen idiomatization involving expletive or profane epithets.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that Mandarin and Cantonese differ in the use of profane expressions or expletives, with Cantonese allowing for the dual use of both profanity *gwai* (devil) and expletive *X*, but not Mandarin, where expletives seem to be much preferred over profanity.

Furthermore, in case of denials, Cantonese allows for the intrusive use of *gwai X* in di-syllabic adjectives such as 有錢 *jau-cin* [having-money] 'rich' and 開心 *hoi-sum* [open-heart] 'happy' with the same illocutionary forces.[6]

34. [Z-S]   jau gwai X   cin   (Cantonese)
    張三   有 鬼 X 錢
    [Z-S]   - have- devil- X- money
    "Johnson is not rich at all"

35. Jaucin,   [Z-S]   gwai X gam hoisum   (Cantonese)
    有錢,   張三   鬼 X 咁 開心
    Have money- [Z-S]   - devil- X- very-open heart
    "Johnson is happy to be rich"

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[6] For related discussions, reference may be made to Lee & Chin (2007).

36. Jaucin,   [Z-S]   hoi gwai X sum   (Cantonese)
    有錢,   張三   開 鬼   X 心
    Have money- [Z-S]   - open-devil- X- heart
    "Johnson is not happy to be rich"

37. Jaucin,   [Z-S]   hoisum go gwai X aa !   (Cantonese)
    有錢,   張三   開心   個 鬼   X 呀 !
    Have money- [Z-S]   - open heart-CL-devil- X-PART
    "Johnson is not happy to be rich at all !"

However, this does not seem to be the case for Mandarin:

38. ?Youqian, [Z-S]   kai   tama de   xin   (Mandarin)
    ?有錢,   張三   開   他媽的   心
    Have money- [Z-S]   -open-his mother de-heart
    "Johnson is not happy to be rich"

The intrusive infixation of epithets in disyllabic elements in Cantonese adjectival expressions is relatively unique to the language but is subject to constraints such that not all disyllabic strictures may allow infixation. Furthermore infixations of expressions such as those discussed so far do not always project the illocutionary force of denial but can reverse the polarity of the propositional content. For example, in contrast to sentences (35) and (37), if inherently negative disyllabic adjectives like 黑心 *hak-sum* [black-heart] 'evil' and 辣撻 *lat-tat* 'dirty' take on infixed elements like 鬼 X, then it does not reverse the polarity of the illocutionary force regarding 'evil' or 'dirty' but adds emphatic stress on the extent of 'evil' and 'dirt'.

39. [Z-S]   hak gwai X sum   (Cantonese)
    張三   黑 鬼   X 心
    [Z-S]   - black-devil- X- heart
    "Johnson is very evil.".

40. [Z-S]   laat gwai X taat   (Cantonese)
    張三   辣 鬼   X 撻
    [Z-S]   -dirty-devil- X- dirty
    "Johnson is very dirty."

Further deliberations will be necessary but are beyond the scope of this short presentation.

4. Concluding Remark

It is hoped that this paper has drawn attention to the need to postulate pseudo-comparative sentences and the use of modus tollens to analyze the illocutionary force of denial which differs from negation. The saliency of the illocutionary force can be simplified and crystallized as simple expressions such as the epithet "like hell" and can project opposite polarities of denial and positive emphasis in both cases, thereby revealing different origins. At the same time, we hope to show that there is some aspect of the underlying idiomaticized comparison to convey denial or exclamatory emphasis with respect to some *gradable* attribute in English and that Chinese requires the attributes to be both *gradable* and *identical* in the underlying constituent sentences and propositions. Furthermore, Mandarin and Cantonese, even though dialects of the same language, show interesting variations in the development of the two kinds of illocutionary forces.

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