

André Joly, *Negation and the Comparative Particle in English*. Cahiers de Psychomécanique du Langage, No 9. Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 1967, 44 pp., \$ 2.95.

This short monograph is part of an unfinished thesis on "Negation in English". (The incompleteness of the bibliographical references, although avoidable, is probably due to this.) It has no doubt been published separately because it offers new insights into the nature of the comparative construction in English and, presumably, many if not all other languages.

Joly first proposes (p. 9-17) an etymology for the hitherto problematic comparative particle *than*, which he assumes, on various grounds, to be derived from the Old English pronominal relative instrumental *þon* ("by which") followed by a negative particle *ne*. He then (p. 17-44) gives a semantic, philological and syntactic justification for the assumption of a negative element in the second constituent of the comparative construction. The justification for the pronominal instrumental is scanty; on p. 15 we read: „*þon* is an instrumental of comparison", with a footnote: "Cf. Lat. *tam . . . quam* and phrases like *eo melius quo facilius* with the ablative." It seems, nevertheless, that the relative instrumental can easily be understood semantically. A sentence such as *John is taller than Bill* can be analyzed semantically as "John is tall by a standard by which Bill is not", or the like. This instrumental is, indeed, very similar to the Latin *ablativus mensurae* mentioned in Joly's footnote, which expresses the difference between two compared items: *John is ("by") two inches taller than Bill*.

It is, however, the assumption of the negation element in the comparative construction which makes the book interesting and justifies its separate publication. The semantic analysis of the comparative construction given by Joly is not very convincing: he does not base himself on any semantic theory but indulges in some rather loose and speculative semantic free-wheeling.

The philological account of the presence of a negative element in *than* is more convincing. Joly finds interesting traces of comparative negation in Old English texts. He also calls attention to the dialectal use of *nor* instead of *than* and gives various examples from many different dialects. To quote only a few: "I can du little mair *nor* read a shapter i' da Bible" (Shetland Islands; Stewart, *Tales*, 1892); "No older *nor* I be" (Oxfordshire; Rosemary, Chilterns, 1895); "It's richer *nor* you'll be" (United States, Louisiana; *The Telegraph*, Newfoundland, April 1965, Comic section).

Finally, Joly shows on syntactic grounds that a negation element can be assumed to be somehow present in comparatives. He refers to Jespersen who says that "every comparison with *than* implies a negative idea" ¹. The evidence which he adduces is very interesting and, to my knowledge, partly new. He shows that some constructions which normally require a negation element also occur in comparatives. Thus there is the expression *can help*, which can only be used with a negation: *I can't help it* (or in a question). But it also occurs, without negation, after *than*: *I did not trouble myself more than I could help*. (Some purists condemn this as incorrect because illogical, but Joly rightly accepts it as an existing idiom.) Then there are the verbs *need* and *dare*, which, in negative and interrogative sentences, neither take *do* nor accept the *-s* of the third person singular. Both *he need* and *he dare* occur after *more than*. Joly could have added

the use of *any*, which occurs in questions, negations and after *than*. This use of *any* was reason for Ross² to assume the negation element in the deep structure of comparatives.

The material provided by Joly is highly interesting for a better understanding of the grammatical structure of comparatives. In recent literature on the comparative construction³ (apart from Ross's report), no mention is made of the negation element as an explanatory principle. But in view of the data mentioned above it seems beyond doubt that Jespersen, Ross and Joly are right. This hypothesis also accounts in a perfectly natural way for the "expletive" negation found in some comparative constructions in the Romance languages.

The question remains in what form the negation element can be thought to be "hidden" in comparatives. Joly's perspective is largely historical: he identifies it with *ne* in the etymology of *than*. Such a historical identification, however, would not do in a grammatical description. Here the deep structure hypothesis set forth in Chomsky's theory of transformational grammar provides a suitable framework for the description of comparatives with a "hidden" negation element. One would wish Joly to have enlarged a little on this possibility of grammatical description.

It may be mentioned, incidentally, that the material assembled here seems to indicate that there may well be a "deep" or "underlying" similarity between negations, questions and *if*-clauses: *any*, *can help*, *he need* and *he dare* occur in all three constructions⁴. But, of course, much further research in the syntax of English and other languages will have to be done before the exact nature of such a relationship can be established.

This little book not only offers a well-motivated etymology of English *than*, but is also a valuable contribution to the study of English grammar.

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Notes

1. Otto Jespersen, *Negation in English and Other Languages*. Copenhagen, 1917, p. 80.

2. John Robert Ross, *A proposed rule of tree-pruning*. Unpublished report MIT, Cambridge, Mass., p. 8-10.

3. R. B. Lees, "Grammatical analysis of the English comparative construction", *Word* 17 (1961), p. 171-185.

C. S. Smith, "A class of complex modifiers in English", *Language* 37 (1961) p. 342-365.

H. Pilch, "Comparative constructions in English", *Language* 41 (1965) p. 37-58.

R. Huddleston, "More on the English comparative", *Journal of Linguistics* 3 (1967) p. 91-102.

4. This does not seem to apply to *he need* and *he dare* in conditional *if*-clauses.

Phyllis Hodgson, *Three 14th-Century English Mystics. Writers and their Work*: No. 196. Published for the British Council and the National Book League by Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1967, 47 pp., 3s. 6d net.

Since no University syllabus of late Medieval vernacular Literature is complete without some study of the writings of the English Mystics, we are fortunate