

# Reflections on the grammatical category of the *than* element in English comparative constructions: A corpus-based systemic functional approach



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Nominative pronouns do not tend to end a comparative construction.
- The accusative forms of personal pronouns following *than* are the stressed personal pronouns.
- In comparative constructions *than* is a paratactic conjunction.

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## ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that in comparative constructions, when the clausal element compared is the subject of the matrix clause, the personal pronoun following *than* can be either nominative which is usually used in formal English, where *than* is considered as a conjunction, or accusative which is usually used in informal English, where *than* is considered as a preposition. However, the data collected from the COCA corpus indicate that nominative pronouns do not tend to end a comparative construction in either formal or informal English. Based on the fundamentals of Systemic Functional Linguistics, it is improper to consider the accusative form of personal pronouns in comparative constructions as the object of *than*; rather they are the stressed personal pronouns. It is concluded that in comparative constructions *than* is always a conjunction, and the personal pronoun following *than* can be expanded into a finite clause. However, if the nominal group following *than* has no comparee in the matrix clause, it is not a comparative clause and the *than*-phrase is a prepositional phrase. It is further concluded that in comparative constructions *than* is best considered as a paratactic conjunction because comparative constructions cannot be transpositioned with the primary clauses in clause complexes.

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## 1. Introduction

With the development of the syntactic theories, the study of the English comparative constructions is becoming deeper and more systematic (e.g. Pilch, 1965; Doherty and Schwartz, 1967; Bresnan, 1973; Heim, 1985, 2000; Izvorski, 1995; Kennedy, 2000, 2002, 2007; Kennedy and Merchant, 2000; Matushansky, 2002, 2011; Bhatt and Pancheva, 2004; Bhatt and Takahashi, 2011; Lechner, 2004). However, these studies are within the framework of generative linguistics, focusing mainly on the movement or the deletion of the verb phrases or the noun phrases in comparative

constructions but leaving the case of the personal pronoun following the *than* element and its grammatical category untouched. They take for granted the opinion of traditional grammarians such as Quirk et al. (1972, 1985), Thomson and Martinet (1986), Alexander (1988) and Wilson (1993), etc. that the *than* element in comparative constructions can be either a conjunction or a preposition, and the case of the personal pronouns following *than* can be either nominative or accusative. Here is an example given by Quirk et al. (1985, p. 886):

- (1) a. He always wakes up earlier *than* I.  
b. He always wakes up earlier *than* me.

There is only one clausal element to be compared to in the matrix clause in each of the two sentences in (1). In (1a), *than* is a

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conjunction, and the nominative *I* is a reduced clause, and in (1b), *than* is a preposition, hence the accusative *me* is used. If there are two arguments in the matrix clause, the remaining personal pronoun following *than* should be nominative when it is compared with the subject or accusative when it is compared with the object of the matrix clause. For example:

- (2) a. But in a downturn, you love it *more than they*.  
 b. Is he gonna like her *more than me*?

However, if the comparative clause is reduced to a noun phrase, “ambiguity can arise as to whether a remaining noun phrase is subject or object” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1132). For example:

- (3) Jack loves the dog more than *his wife*.

Traditional grammarians such as Coe (1980, p. 61), Quirk et al. (1985, p. 1132) and Thomson and Martinet et al. (1986, p. 26) believe that when the same verb is required before and after *than*, an auxiliary verb can be used for the second occurrence and if there is no change of tense, in very formal English the auxiliary can be dropped. In informal English, however, accusatives are more usual, and “*than* counts as preposition” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 337). Thus, if *his wife* in (3) is replaced by a personal pronoun, formal English makes the distinction on whether it is the subject or the object. However, a new ambiguity will occur here. Without relevant background information, it is hard to determine whether the accusative pronoun is compared with the object in the matrix clause in formal English or it is compared with the subject in informal English. Therefore, “this use of objective case is considered to be grammatically incorrect” (Ansell, 2000, p. 327).

The purpose of this paper is to conduct corpus-based quantitative research of comparative constructions. For this purpose, this research intends to answer the following two questions: (1) What is the principle of genre distribution of the case of personal pronouns following *than* in comparative constructions? (2) What is the grammatical category of *than*? To answer the two questions, Section 2 explains how the corpus is selected and the data collected. Section 3 analyzes the genre distribution of the data collected from the corpus. The case of the personal pronouns in comparative constructions and the grammatical category of *than* are examined in Section 4.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Corpus

In this research we will use the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). We choose COCA because it is of a relatively large size (464 million words). This allows collecting enough data for constructions of relatively low occurring frequencies. The corpus is available online (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca>). We can write relevant search queries to help retrieve and count up the occurrences of comparative constructions. COCA is nearly evenly divided (20% in each genre) between the five genres: Spoken texts, Fiction texts, Magazine texts, Newspaper texts, and Academic texts. This is helpful for analyzing the distributions of different types of comparative constructions in different genres. See Table 1:

**Table 1**  
Genre distribution of numbers of words in COCA.

| Genre         | Spoken     | Fiction    | Magazine   | Newspaper  | Academic   | Total       |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Num. of words | 95,385,672 | 90,344,134 | 95,564,706 | 91,680,966 | 91,044,778 | 464,020,256 |

### 2.2. Data processing

To answer the two research questions, it is not necessary to retrieve all the comparative constructions in the corpus. We retrieve only the collocations consisting of the *than* element and a nominative or accusative first or third personal pronoun or a nominative pronoun plus an auxiliary verb directly ending a sentence. See Table 2:

The second personal pronoun *you* is not included because it does not show case. It should be noted that not all the nominative pronouns in the *than* + nominative + auxiliary constructions are the standard of comparison. See example (4):

- (4) I think I feel so much better *than I did*. (COCA\_SPOK)

The auxiliary verb *did* cannot be omitted because it encodes past tense. The clausal element being compared is the tense of the verb *feel* rather than the nominative pronoun *I*. So the *than* + nominative + auxiliary constructions can be categorized into three groups according to the comparee in the matrix clause: the subject, the auxiliary verb and the subject plus auxiliary. As for the *than* + nominative constructions directly ending a sentence, no matter how many arguments there are in the matrix clause, the nominative pronoun is always the subject of the reduced comparative clause. As for the *than* + accusative constructions, if there is only one possible comparee, that is, the subject in the matrix clause, the accusative pronoun is compared with the subject, and if there are two, it may be compared with either the subject or the object of the matrix clause.

We then classify the three types of comparative constructions collected from COCA according to the Spoken, Fiction, Magazine, Newspaper and Academic genres into 15 groups. Finally, we will use the UAM CorpusTool 2.8.12 which is a set of tools developed for the linguistic annotation of text to create a system, incorporate and annotate the data according to the system. See Fig. 1:

## 3. Results

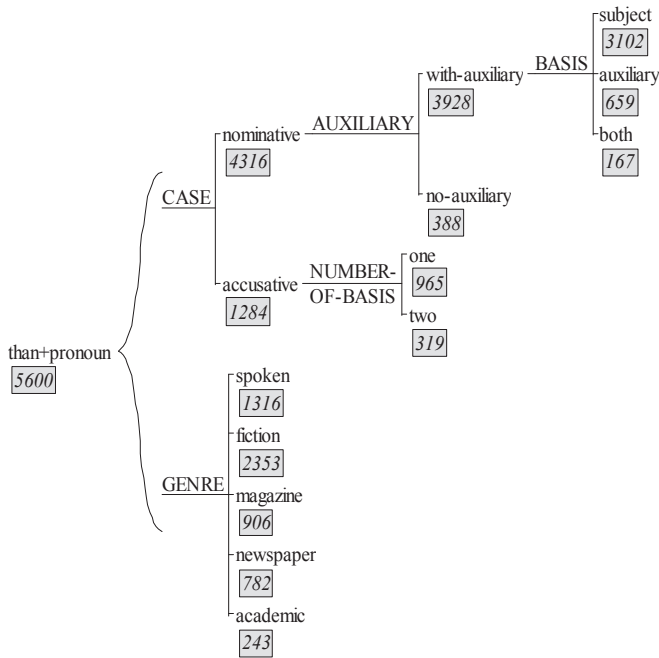
### 3.1. Types of comparative constructions

The matrix clause of a *than* + nominative construction may have one or two arguments, that is, it may have a subject and an object or not. No matter whether there is an object in the matrix clause or not, the comparee of the nominative pronoun in a *than* + nominative construction is always the subject, hence, no ambiguity occurs. Take the total number of *than* + nominative constructions in COCA for instance, those with an auxiliary verb accounting for 91%, and those with no auxiliary verb, 9%. The two form a skewed system, the former being unmarked, and the latter, marked.

It can also be seen in Fig. 1 that in comparative constructions, there are far more nominative pronouns with an auxiliary verb than accusative pronouns, the probability being 0.75:0.25, and there are also many more accusative pronouns than nominative pronouns with no auxiliary verb, the probability being 0.77: 0.23. In the following, we will count the accusative personal pronouns in comparative constructions with one and two arguments in the matrix clauses in COCA. See Table 3:

**Table 2**  
Types of comparative constructions collected from COCA.

| Type                                 | Example  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>than + nominative</i>             | And if you can distill the Universal Solvent, you are better wizards <i>than I</i> . (COCA_FIC)  |
| <i>than + accusative</i>             | She was fully two inches taller <i>than he</i> . (COCA_FIC)<br>Dickie is a few years younger <i>than me</i> . (COCA_FIC)<br>She was about a head taller <i>than him</i> . (COCA_FIC) |
| <i>than + nominative + auxiliary</i> | You know the story better <i>than I do</i> . (COCA_FIC)<br>Tell him you can give a better one <i>than he can</i> . (COCA_MAG)  |



**Fig. 1.** *Than + personal pronoun* constructions in COCA.

It can be seen from Table 3 that there are more *than + accusative* constructions with one argument than those with two in the matrix clause in COCA, the probability being 0.75: 0.25. That is to say, most of the *than + accusative* constructions have one argument in the matrix clause. Of those with two arguments, most are compared with the subject, accounting for 75%, and all of those with one argument are compared with the subject of the matrix clause.

When the accusative pronoun has two possible comparees in the matrix clause, ambiguity does not always occur, as in (5a). This is because the personal pronoun *me* cannot be projected by the verb group *say*. However, even if there might be ambiguity, the ambiguity would be eliminated in context, as in (5b).

- (5) a. You can say it better *than me*. (COCA\_SPOK)
- b. Angelo said. “But I’m in charge, and I’m shooting the woman. I want to make sure she’s dead. I’m the one who has

**Table 3**  
*Than + accusative* constructions.

|         | One argument | Two arguments | Total |
|---------|--------------|---------------|-------|
| Subject | 965          | 240           | 1205  |
| Object  |              | 79            | 79    |
| Total   | 965          | 319           | 1284  |

to answer to Cerino.” “So you think you can shoot someone better *than me*?” Tony said (COCA\_FIC).

3.2. *Genre distribution*

This section discusses the genre distribution of the three types (*than + nominative + auxiliary*, *than + nominative*, and *than + accusative*) of comparative constructions in COCA. The See Table 4:

In fact, the original frequencies shown in Table 4 cannot exactly represent the genre distribution of the three types of comparative constructions because the COCA is only nearly evenly divided between genres (See Table 1). Therefore, to facilitate the effective comparison, we will convert the original frequencies into the standard frequencies of per 100 million words, as is shown in Fig. 2:

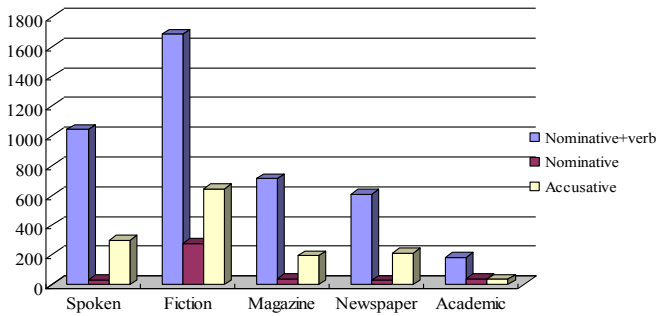
Fig. 2 shows that comparative constructions tend to be used mostly in Fiction texts, with Spoken texts, Magazine texts, Newspaper texts and Academic texts following. In each of the five genres, the *than + nominative + auxiliary* constructions are the largest in number. There are far fewer nominative pronouns directly ending a sentence than accusative pronouns in Spoken texts, Fiction texts, Magazine texts and Newspaper texts, but slightly more in Academic texts, the numbers being 39 and 31 respectively. This is to some extent in agreement with traditional grammar (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985) in that nominative pronouns tend to be used in formal English. To confirm this, we will check the genre-internal ratios of nominative pronouns without auxiliary verbs out of the total nominative pronouns and those out of the total personal pronouns. See Fig. 3:

In Spoken texts, the ratio of nominative pronouns without auxiliary is 3.3% out of the total 1029 nominative pronouns and 2.58% out of the total personal pronouns respectively. Both are the lowest among the five genres. In formal Academic texts, however, the ratios are the highest among the five genres. Given that Spoken texts are informal and texts in other genres are formal, the average ratios of the formal genres are 10.77% and 8.26% respectively. This is exactly what we would expect on the basis of traditional grammar (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985): comparative constructions with a nominative pronoun without an auxiliary verb tend to appear in formal/written English rather than in informal use. The accusative pronouns, however, show another picture. See Fig. 4:

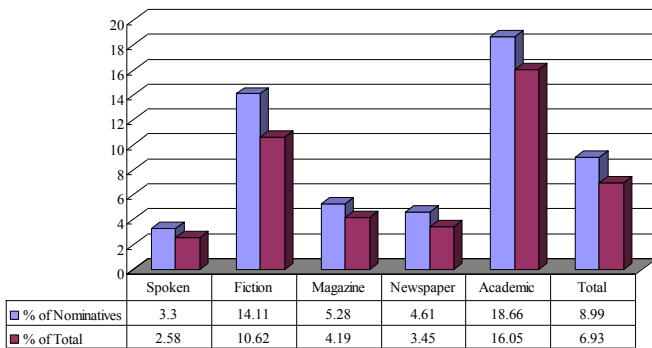
It can be seen from Fig. 4 that in informal Spoken texts, the percentage of accusative pronouns is slightly lower than the Average (22.93%) and there are no significant genre differences among the other four genres except the formal Academic genre which is the lowest. This is not quite in agreement with Quirk et al. (1985) in that accusative pronouns as comparee in comparative constructions are more usual in informal English because Newspaper texts are also formal and the Newspaper genre has the highest percentage among the five genres. According to Jespersen (1933), accusatives are used “especially if the verb in the main sentence is not transitive so that no misconception can arise” (Jespersen, 1933, p. 133). Sentences such as *He is taller than me* are

**Table 4**  
Genre distribution of *than* + personal pronoun (absolute frequencies).

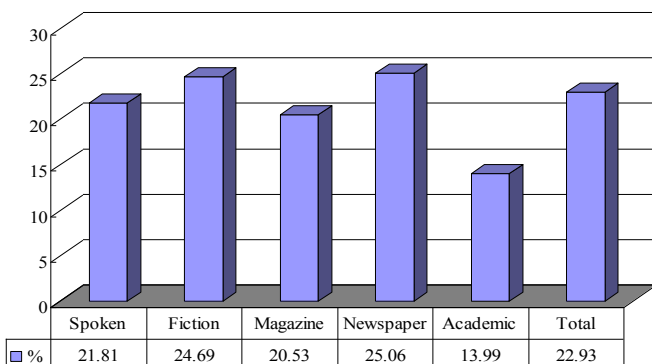
|           | <i>than</i> + nominative + auxiliary | <i>than</i> + nominative | <i>than</i> + accusative |                      |          | Total |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|----------|-------|
|           |                                      |                          | Compared with subject    | Compared with object | Subtotal |       |
| Spoken    | 995                                  | 34                       | 268                      | 19                   | 287      | 1316  |
| Fiction   | 1522                                 | 250                      | 548                      | 33                   | 581      | 2353  |
| Magazine  | 682                                  | 38                       | 173                      | 13                   | 186      | 906   |
| Newspaper | 559                                  | 27                       | 185                      | 11                   | 196      | 782   |
| Academic  | 170                                  | 39                       | 31                       | 3                    | 34       | 243   |
| Total     | 3928                                 | 388                      | 1205                     | 79                   | 1284     | 5600  |



**Fig. 2.** Genre distribution of *than* + personal pronoun (standard frequency).



**Fig. 3.** Ratios of nominative pronouns without auxiliary.



**Fig. 4.** Ratios of accusative pronouns (out of total number of pronouns following *than*).

not only popularly used in spoken English, but also popularly seen in the works of many famous writers. For example:

- (6) a. He was a good bit older *than me*. (*Dream Children: A Reverie* (Charles Lamb, 1823))
- b.

**Table 5**  
Accusative pronouns following *than* with two arguments in the matrix clause.

|           | Subject | Object | T-Stat | Signif. | ChiSqu. | Signif. |
|-----------|---------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
|           | N = 240 | N = 79 |        |         |         |         |
| Spoken    | 54      | 19     | 0.284  |         | 0.081   |         |
| Fiction   | 98      | 33     | 0.147  |         | 0.022   |         |
| Magazine  | 38      | 13     | 0.131  |         | 0.017   |         |
| Newspaper | 47      | 11     | 1.130  |         | 1.280   |         |
| Academic  | 3       | 3      | 1.446  |         | 2.090   |         |

+ Weak Significance (90%) ++ Medium Significance (95%) +++ High Significance (98%).

She was neither better bred nor wiser *than you or me*. (*The History of Henry Esmond, Esq* (William Makepeace Thackeray, 1852))

In the 1284 comparative constructions with an accusative pronoun, there are 965 having an intransitive verb in the matrix clause and 319, a transitive verb (See Table 3). This is to say that even if the verb in the matrix clause is transitive, accusative pronouns are also popularly used in comparative constructions. See Table 5:

It can be seen from Table 5 that the genre distribution of subject comparees is similar to that of object comparees. Neither T-test nor Chi-square test shows any significant differences, indicating that the two groups of numbers are significantly correlated ( $R = 0.974$ ;  $p = 0.005 < 0.01$ ).

The above quantitative analysis shows that accusative pronouns in comparative constructions are popularly used not only in spoken but also in written English. If the standard of comparison in a comparative construction is the subject, people tend to use the type of nominative + auxiliary. Nominative pronouns do not tend to end a comparative construction directly in either formal or informal English. It is not the case that accusative pronouns are more usual in informal English. The questions are why the accusative case is used since the nominative case is acceptable and whether it is appropriate to consider *than* as a preposition when it is followed by an accusative pronoun. The two questions will be answered in the next section respectively.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1. Why accusative

Of the three metafunctions in the Hallidayan sense (Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, 2014), i.e., ideational, interpersonal and textual, the textual function is realized through the thematic structure and the information structure. The information structure is composed of the Given and the New, the two constituting an information unit. Grammatical words form closed systems and lexical words are open sets. Personal pronouns belong to the closed systems; they are general in meaning, and they refer to relevant lexical words with specific meaning. Therefore, in the

information structure, personal pronouns always occur at the position of the Given information, while lexical words are put at the position of the New information. This is to fulfill the principle of end-focus, i.e., the information focus is usually at the end of the clause. For example, the function of the formal subject *it* in an *it*-cleft construction is to put the phrasal or clausal subject at the position of the information focus. Comparative constructions such as *You are taller than I* are grammatically correct. However, the nominative pronoun *I* encodes no specific new information, so it is a marked structure to put *I* at the position of information focus. This is why an auxiliary verb always follows the nominative pronoun to fulfill the principle of end-focus and to avoid simple repetition. Although auxiliary verbs also form a closed system, they function as the cohesive device of substitution (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). The auxiliary verb as a substitution does not refer exactly to its antecedent, hence it has the status of information focus. This also goes for nominal substitutions. For example, the substitute *one* in *I have a red pencil, I want to buy a blue one* falls in the position of the information focus because the *one* is not co-referential with the *red pencil* in the preceding clause; it is not the Given information. So, *You are taller than I am* forms an unmarked comparative construction. According to the data collected in the previous section, *You are taller than me* is also acceptable. Except in Academic texts, there are far more comparative constructions with an accusative pronoun than those with a nominative pronoun following *than*.

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (1999, p. 12), language construes experience from two dimensions: the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic one. The two dimensions are interrelated. The paradigmatic organization is realized into the system and the syntagmatic organization into the structure. In the syntagmatic paradigm, when the comparee of an accusative pronoun in the comparative construction is the subject of the matrix clause, people will naturally categorize *than* as a preposition. The representation of Systemic Functional Linguistics is the choice in the system network. In a comparative construction, when the standard of comparison following *than* is compared with the subject of the matrix clause, the choice within the system of personal pronouns will not affect the structure itself. Both the nominative and accusative pronouns can potentially be chosen, indicating that the nominative and the accusative have the same syntactic function and that the choice will not change the syntactic organization of the sentence. Therefore, it is not appropriate to conclude simply that the accusative form of a personal pronoun is really accusative, and hence to consider *than* as a preposition.

We can resort to other languages having similar comparative constructions to help explain the syntactic functions of the accusative form of personal pronouns, such as French. French clitic personal pronouns cannot occur at the end of a clause, i.e., the position of the information focus. Even an objective personal pronoun will also precede the verb. For example, the direct object *me* in (7a) is preceding the verb *aimer*, and both the indirect object *me* and the direct object *le* in (8a) are placed preceding the verb *expliquer*. This is to put verbs with specific meaning at the position of information focus.

- (7) a. Il m'aime.  
b. He loves *me*.  
(8) a. Tu ne peux pas *me* l'expliquer.  
b. You can not explain it to *me*.

However, French personal pronouns can also be placed after the verbs. They are the stressed personal pronouns, and are usually used in affirmative imperative clauses. For example, the indirect object, the stressed personal pronoun *moi* in (9a) is placed after the verb *Montrez*. In this case, the direct object *la* is also placed after the verb

because the stressed *moi* occupies the position of information focus.

- (9) a. – *Cette photo est vraiment belle.*  
– *Montrez-la-moi.*  
b. – This photo is really good.  
– Show it to *me*.

There are no stressed personal pronouns in English. However, the stress is on *her* and *him* in *I like her no better than him* (Jespersen, 1933, p. 97). In imperative clauses, the function of stress is also realized by the accusative pronouns. For example, the English equivalent of (9a) is (9b).

When a single personal pronoun is used to answer a question, it is the stressed form in French, but the accusative form in English. For example:

- (10) a. – Qui est-ce?  
– *Moi.*  
b. – Who is this?  
– *Me.*

Here, *moi* in (10a) and *me* in (10b) are the elliptical form of *C'est moi* and *This is me* respectively. The stressed personal pronoun in French can be separated from the verb, and unstressed personal pronouns are always used together with a verb. In (11a), the stressed personal pronoun *moi* functions as the subject, but it is still the accusative form in its English equivalent in (11b).

- (11) a. – Comment allez-vous?  
– Bien, merci. Et vous?  
– *Moi aussi.*  
b. – How are you?  
– Fine, thank you. And you?  
– *Me too.*

In (11a), *moi aussi* is actually the elliptical form of *Je vais bien aussi*. In (11b), *me too* is also the elliptical form of *I am fine too*. It can be seen that the accusative pronouns in English can also function as the stressed form of the nominative pronouns. Furthermore, both the French stressed pronouns and the English accusative pronouns can function as the appositive of the subject. For example:

- (12) a. *Moi, j'aime bien le boeuf!*  
b. *Me, I like beef very much!*  
(13) a. *Lui et moi, nous ne voulons pas partir demain.*  
b. *Him and me, we don't want to leave tomorrow.*

In comparative constructions, French nominative pronouns can also occur at the end of the construction in their stressed form. The French comparative construction is similar to that of English, but the comparative conjunction *que* can never be considered as a preposition. For example, it is obvious that *me* in (14b) is not accusative because there is only one clausal element as comparee, that is, the subject, in the matrix clause.

- (14) a. Tu es plus grand *que moi*.  
b. You are taller *than me*.

According to the above analysis, it can be concluded that the stressed personal pronoun can be used as a substitute for the nominative personal pronoun at the position of the information focus in the accusative form in English. In this case, the comparative construction itself has not changed structurally at all. The conjunction *than* has not changed into a preposition; it still introduces an elliptical comparative clause. In *you are taller*



*than I* and *You are taller than me*, the comparees of *I* and *me* are both *you* in the matrix clause, but *me* here is not an accusative pronoun; rather it is a stressed personal pronoun. When there is no ambiguity, *than me* is the unmarked choice and *than I*, the marked choice. The concepts of unmarkedness and markedness reflect the basic idea of probability. The choice between nominative pronouns and accusative pronouns following *than* is not that between correctness and wrongness. They both are features of a system, one being higher probability and the other lower. When there are two arguments in the matrix clause and the personal pronoun following *than* is compared with the subject of the matrix clause, the unmarked form is the nominative pronoun plus an auxiliary verb. The function of the auxiliary verb is to avoid the nominative personal pronoun with no specific meaning occurring at the position of information focus and to avoid the possible ambiguity caused by an accusative pronoun. When the personal pronoun is compared with the object of the matrix clause, the accusative form is the only choice. In English, it is unmarked to end a sentence with an accusative pronoun. If there is only one possible comparee, the nominative pronoun plus an auxiliary verb is grammatically acceptable, but it is too formal and not concise, but if there is not an auxiliary verb, it will break the principle of end-focus. So the best choice is to use the stressed personal pronoun. This fulfills both the principle of conciseness and that of information focus. No matter whether in formal or in informal texts, it is marked to end a comparative construction with a nominative pronoun. Since markedness does not affect the grammaticality, we do sometimes observe nominative personal pronouns ending a comparative construction, even though the probability is relatively low. Therefore, it is not necessary to change the syntactic structure for an awkward explanation.

The above analysis shows that no matter whether it is a nominative or an accusative personal pronoun following *than*, the grammatical category of *than* will not change. It is always a conjunction. See example (15):

- (15) a. They had *guns bigger than me*. (COCA\_MAG)  
 b. This makes them no better *than me*. (COCA\_FIC)

Grammatically, (15a) is a simple clause, *guns bigger than me* functions as the complement of the verbal group *had*. However, *than* is still a conjunction rather than a preposition because the comparative construction is compared with an elliptical rank-shifted matrix clause which is a relative clause of *the guns*. This sentence can be restored as *They had guns which are bigger than I am*. In (15b), *me* is ambiguous. Even if changed into *I*, it is still ambiguous. This is because the two possible comparees in the matrix clause both function as the subject of the comparative clause. This sentence can be expanded into either *This makes them no better than I (make them)* or *This makes them no better than I (am good)*.

#### 4.2. Further remarks on 'than'

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (1994) notes that the dispute over the grammatical category of *than* has been going on for more than two centuries. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the conjunctive use of *than* is derived from the use as adverbial of time. It did not start appearing as a preposition followed by an object pronoun until the sixteenth century. In modern English, *than* can be both a conjunction and a preposition, but when it is used as a preposition, it introduces a complement to form a prepositional phrase rather than a comparative construction. For example:

- (16) a. The uncongested RTT of this path is less *than 10 ms*. (COCA\_ACAD)  
 b. Thus, buffering problems have been accumulating for *more than a decade*. (COCA\_ACAD)

The two sentences in (16) are quite different from *You are taller than me*. The complement *10 ms* in (16a) and that in (16b) have no comparee in the matrix clause, and "there is no possibility of expanding the *than*-phrase into a clause" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1129). In *You are taller than me*, however, *than me* has the possibility to be expanded into a clause.

According to Systemic Functional Linguistics, two clauses can be connected through certain logico-semantic relations to form a clause complex. One is the primary clause and the other, secondary. The two clauses are interdependent by parataxis or hypotaxis. In parataxis, the two clauses are equal in status. Both clauses tend to stand independently and to enact a proposition. However, they are not isolated from each other because the relationship between them is structural. The first clause is the initiative clause and the second, the continuing clause. In hypotaxis, the two clauses are not equal in status. Only the dominant clause can be independent, and the dependent clause functions as the modification of the dominant clause. The dominant clause enacts a proposition but the dependent clause cannot. Paratactic clause complexes have their corresponding textual cohesive equivalents, but hypotactic clause complexes have not. Because of the unequal status, the position of the dependent clause is free; it can be placed before, within or after the dominant clause. The dependent clause placed before the dominant clause is represented as the Theme of the clause complex, while the dependent clause after the dominant clause has no topic status.

Interdependency and logico-semantic relation intersect to form a relation network of clause complexes. The interdependent relation between the two clauses in a clause complex is structural, and is realized by relevant conjunctions or zero conjunctions. However, two independent clauses are cohesive; they tend to be paratactic. The logico-semantic relation of extension between two independent clauses can be realized through zero conjunctions or sometimes through conjunctive adverbs such as *however* and *furthermore* to realize adversative and positive additions of extension respectively, and the logico-semantic relation of enhancement, through the meta-messages such as *The condition/reason is that...*, *This is because...*, and *That is why...*, etc. The fact that two independent clauses are basically paratactic can also be reflected in the fact that they can not be transpositioned (Huang, 1998). This is why such conjunctions as *and* or *but* are avoided at the beginning of a sentence.

Because of the same status of the two clauses, "the question of which is the primary clause in a paratactic relation is simply a matter of which comes first" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014, p. 446). For example:

- (17) a. My alarm clock didn't go off, *so I walked into an exam late*. (COCA\_MAG)  
 b. \**So I walked into an exam late*, my alarm clock didn't go off.  
 c. \*I walked into an exam late, *so my alarm clock didn't go off*.  
 (18) a. She has a twenty-year-old son, *and she has all-American Nick*. (COCA\_MAG)  
 b. \**And she has all-American Nick*, she has a twenty-year-old son.  
 c. She has all-American Nick, *and she has a twenty-year-old son*.  
 (19) a. Mary is cleverer *than Jane is pretty*. (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1129)  
 b. \**Than Jane is pretty* Mary is cleverer.

c. Jane is prettier *than* Mary is clever.

(17a) and (18a) are clause complexes of paratactic enhancement and paratactic extension respectively, and the two clauses cannot be transpositioned, hence (17b) and (18b) are unacceptable. (17c) is grammatically correct but semantically unacceptable, and (18c) is acceptable both grammatically and semantically. Likewise, *Mary is cleverer* is the primary clause in (19a), and it cannot be transpositioned with the secondary clause *Jane is pretty*, hence (19b) is ungrammatical. (19c) is acceptable because the clause *Jane is prettier* before *than* is now the primary clause.

However, in hypotaxis, the dominant clause always dominates no matter where it is placed. For examples:

- (20) a. They keep you *because* you make them money. (COCA\_MAG)  
 b. *Because* you make them money, they keep you.  
 c. They keep you *because* of your making them money.

(20a) is different from (17a), (18a) and (19a) in that it is a hypotactic clause complex, and the two clauses can be transpositioned, hence (20b) is grammatically acceptable. Hypotactic conjunctions introduce a dependent clause which can be considered to be functioning as an element of the dominant clause, and hence have the potential to become prepositions, such as (20c). Paratactic conjunctions connect two syntactic constructions of the same status, hence it is impossible for them to be transferred into prepositions. From this perspective, it is best to consider *than* introducing a comparative clause as a paratactic conjunction. It can be confirmed that *than* is a conjunction, even when there is only one accusative pronoun left following *than* so long as the pronoun can be expanded into a clause.

## 5. Conclusion

In a comparative construction, when the comparee of the personal pronoun following *than* is the subject of the matrix clause, both nominative and accusative forms are acceptable, but the choice of the accusative form does not change the grammatical category of *than*. The accusative form does not mean accusative case; rather it is the stressed personal pronoun functioning as the subject. The *than* + nominative constructions are grammatically acceptable. However, because nominative pronouns carry no specific meaning, it is marked to put them at the position of the information focus. In such constructions, an auxiliary verb is necessary to be placed following the nominative pronoun to ensure the balance of the information structure. The *than* + accusative constructions on the other hand are unmarked. This has no relationship with genre. Therefore, in comparative constructions, when there is only one comparee in the matrix clause, both nominative and accusative pronouns are acceptable, but there exists a skewed probability. The *than* + nominative construction is marked and the *than* + accusative construction, unmarked. When there are two arguments and the subject is compared in the matrix clause, the accusative is acceptable if there is no ambiguity occurring, but in most cases the nominative + auxiliary construction is preferred. The *than* + nominative pronoun constructions without an auxiliary verb tend to occur in very formal English, such as Academic texts.

In comparative constructions, *than* is always a conjunction and the following element can be expanded into a clause. It can be used as a preposition only when the following nominal group is not the standard of comparison, hence forming a prepositional phrase. In this case, the *than*-phrase is not a comparative construction, and the whole sentence is not a clause complex but a simple clause. We cannot say that the *than* element in sentences such as *You are taller than me* can be analyzed as either a conjunction or a preposition; it

is solely a conjunction. It is further concluded that in comparative constructions *than* is a paratactic conjunction rather than a hypotactic conjunction because the comparative clause cannot be transpositioned with the preceding clause.

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