AG 13: Comparison constructions and similarity-based classification

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Classification of objects and situations can be expressed linguistically in two basic ways, either by ascribing a (nominal or verbal etc.) predicate to the object/situation, or by comparing the object/ situation to some entity known to the addressee. When ascribing a predicate classification is performed according to the meaning of the predicate. In (1a), for example, we are told that Anna's height is 1,80m. But when using a comparison construction the classifying property has to be inferred from a similarity relation between the compared entities and the relevant respect of similarity. Thus, in (1b) we only learn that Anna and Marie are similar with respect to height and we have to infer Anna's height from what we know about Marie. Likewise, in (2a) the property of the student in question is explicitly mentioned while (2b) it has to be inferred from what we know about Marie. Finally, in (3a) we are told that Anna went to Vienna via Prague, while in (3b) we only learn that there is some respect with respect to which Anna's trip to Vienna was similar to Marie's trip.

(1) a. Anna ist 1,80m groß.   'Anna is 1,80 tall'
    b. Anna ist so groß wie Marie.   'Anna is as tall as Marie'

(2) a. Uns fehlt eine kluge Mathestudentin im Seminar.   'We need a clever Math student in the seminar.'
    b. Uns fehlt eine Studentin wie Marie im Seminar.   'We need a student like Marie in the seminar.'

(3) a. Anna ist über Prag nach Wien gefahren.   'Anna went to Vienna via Prague.'
    b. Anna ist genau so nach Wien gefahren wie Marie.   'Anna took the same route to Vienna as Marie.'

While the meaning of comparison constructions based on gradable adjectives has been discussed in detail (e.g., Bierwisch 1986, Kennedy 1999), there are few approaches addressing comparison constructions beyond the adjectival domain and there is no general account of how similarity is exploited in natural language. On the other hand, in Cognitive Psychology similarity-based classification is regarded as a basic cognitive ability of human agents and has been studied at length (cf. Hahn & Chater 1998). In the workshop, we would like to address the question of what strategies there are in natural languages to express comparison, how theses strategies can be modeled, and how these strategies relate to the findings from Cognitive Psychology. We are interested in semantic/pragmatic approaches as well as contrastive/typological studies and, in particular, contributions from Cognitive Psychology.

References
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