A Corpus-Driven Approach to English Expressions Based on Comparison: Not so Much A as B and Not so Much A but B

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ABSTRACT

English expressions based on comparisons such as not so much A as B and not so much A but B (henceforth, not so much A as/but B) is one of the most problematic areas for Japanese learners of English. These structures not only enable a variety of expressions to be used in place of A and B, but also have many variations. Based on a corpus-driven approach, this paper focuses on not so much A as/but B, examines the ways in which they occur, and describes their main patterns and variations, as well as their functions. When it is clear in what contexts these expressions are used, it becomes much easier to grasp these complicated structures. This study revealed that these expressions have four main patterns and several variations. They are frequently used to clarify or illuminate a point in the domains where personal perspectives are important, and where the topic is often of a serious nature. Understanding typical usage patterns and functions of these complicated structures leads to more confidence in learning and teaching these structures as part of English language acquisition.

Keywords: Comparative Expressions, English Language, Expression Patterns, Problematic Grammar, Sentence Structure

INTRODUCTION

“English has a rich system of specialized syntax and morphology of the expression of comparisons of various types” (Huddleston et al., 2005), whereas the Japanese language is often referred to as language without obligatory comparative characteristics (cf. Yamamoto, 2004). Therefore, comparative expressions are, on the whole, one of the most problematic grammatical areas for Japanese learners of English. Expressions based on comparisons such as not so much A as/but B, are not an exception. In this paper I focus on not so much A as/but B and I examine the ways in which they are used and describe their main patterns and variations as well as their functions.

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2004), “not so much… as….” is “used to say that one description of someone or something is less suitable or correct...
than another,” but it does not have any reference to the expression “not so much... but...” Other dictionary definitions are relatively similar to the example, and not sufficient for learners to be able to use the structures appropriately.

When I turn to the reference book, Huddleston et al. (2005), I find the explanation that “comparative constructions bear a significant resemblance to coordination in that they may relate syntactically like terms from a wide range of categories,” and some instances are listed. One of them is: He presented [not so much rational as emotional] arguments. In this example the comparative meaning is clearly in evidence, and the instance is analyzed in terms of the grammar of comparison, with as functioning as head of a comparative complement.

Huddleston et al. (2005) continues to refer to “some cases where the literal comparative meaning is beached away, yielding expressions that resemble coordinators.” Not so much X but Y is listed together with as well as, rather than and is explained with the following example.

The similarity between comparison and coordination is reflected in the not infrequent blending of comparative ‘not so much X as Y’ and coordinative ‘not X but Y’: Insofar as science generates any fear, it stems [not so much from scientific prowess and gadgets] [but from the fact that new unanswered questions arise].

In other words, the construction of the pattern not so much X but Y is created by mixing the not so much X as Y and the not X but Y structures.

Another reference book, Swan (2005) refers to both expressions, not so much A as/but B, under the title “special structures with so much”: “We can use not so much... as or not so much... but to make corrections and clarifications.” His instances are: “It wasn’t so much his appearance I liked as his personality. It’s not so much that I don’t want to go, but I just haven’t got time.”

**Aims of the Study and Procedures**

The central aim of this study is to examine the ways in which the English expressions based on the comparison, not so much A as/but B, are used and to explore their functions and relate the findings to pedagogical use, as in what syntactic variations do these expressions have, in what contexts and why are these expressions used? If the answers to these questions become clear, it would be much easier to grasp these complicated structures.

In order to achieve these aims, I first retrieved these constructions from a corpus and presented their frequency distributions. Second, I classified the identified structures according to their forms and meanings. Third, I tried to examine the lexical or syntactical contexts in which these expressions frequently occur and to explore the functions of the expressions. To tackle these questions, a large amount of data was analyzed based on the corpus-driven approach.

**Corpus-Driven Approach**

The approach taken in order to achieve these aims can be described as corpus-driven. This “aims to derive linguistic categories systematically from the recurrent patterns and the frequency distributions that emerge from language context” (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001). The analysis starts from corpus evidence and it is important not to lose contact with the corpora. Römer (2005, p. 7) describes this approach by quoting Sinclair’s statement that “corpus linguistics... often also confronts us with rather surprising findings which existing frameworks fail to account for” (Sinclair, 1994, p. 25).

Römer (2005) also explains in more concrete terms.

Corpus-driven work...provides us with much invaluable information on the nature of language. It shows us how language is typically used in natural discourse and, among other
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