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, Hud-
dleston 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* func-
tioning 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 co-
ordination is reflected in the not infrequent
blending of comparative ‘not so much X as Y’
and coordinative ‘not X but Y’: Insofar as sci-
ence 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 mix-
ing the *not so much X as Y* and the *not X but
Y* structures.

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 clarifica-
tions.” 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 re-
trieved 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 systemati-
cally from the recurrent patterns and the fre-
quency 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 ac-
count for” (Sinclair, 1994, p. 25).

Römer (2005) also explains in more con-
crete terms.

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