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Why you can strand lexical verbs and *do so* in comparatives[1]

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Abstract

The *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* 2002, hereafter *CGEL*) states that lexical verbs cannot be stranded in comparative contexts. It also claims that *do so* cannot appear in comparative constructions. I argue that the generalization of these two related phenomena is too broad. Naturally occurring examples from the highly edited magazine *The Economist* and other independent sources show that they appear in a comparative environment. Although this article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account, it highlights a specific structural condition under which stranded lexical verbs and *do so* appear.

Keywords: comparatives; lexical verbs stranding; *do so*; ellipsis; English grammar

1. Introduction

Analyses of comparative clauses generally involve deletion or ellipsis in the verb phrase (Bresnan 1973). Moreover, comparative clauses are generally taken to strand auxiliaries, not lexical verbs (Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* 2002).

The following example is judged as ungrammatical in *CGEL* (p. 1110).

(1) *I didn't enjoy the concert as much as [Kim had enjoyed __].

CGEL (p. 1530) also notes that the *do so* construction cannot appear in a similar construction.

(2) (a) She earns more than I do/ *than I do so.
(b) He thought it was good, as I did/ *as I did so.

In this article, I present journalistic corpus-based examples where both stranded lexical verbs and *do so* appear in comparative constructions.

2. Attested counterexamples of standard lexical verbs

2.1. *Same X as*

(3) The bad news is that its pilots won't allow it; they want Transavia's pilots to be on the same pay and conditions as they enjoy. (*The Economist*, 20 Sept. 2014)

[1] The title echoes Lakoff & Ross (1976) 'Why you can't do so into the sink'.

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(4) Voters may want the same say on Europe's high politics as they enjoy on its low-brow pop, but it is too early to tell whether they will punish … (*The Economist*, 6 March 2008)

The comparative governor[2] *same* licensed the expanded comparative complement *as they enjoy*.

2.2. *Such X as*

(5) But, while campaigning in the West, he was constrained to reassure American farmers that such protection as they enjoy would not be taken from them. (*The Economist*, 6 March 2025)

The comparative governor *such* licenses the comparative clause.

2.3. *-er X than*

(6) The banks were full of seasonal generosity, offering much better terms than depositors normally enjoy. (*The Economist*, 9 Feb. 2013)

(7) Many are eager to join, so as to reap the benefits of eliminating currency risk, lower interest rates than they now enjoy and (they fondly hope) … (*The Economist*, 3 April 2003)

The suffix *er* is the comparative governor that licenses the comparative clause.

2.4. *More X than*

(8) Many in China cannot understand how the city can be so dissatisfied with so many more privileges than mainlanders enjoy. (*The Economist*, 5 Dec. 2019)

(9) In the future, GM could fill the world's larders with high-protein cereals, vegetables with extra vitamins, and all manner of cheaper, tastier and more nutritious foods than we currently enjoy. (*The Economist*, 10 Nov. 2001)

The comparative governor *more* licenses the comparative clause introduced by *than.*

2.5. *Lexical variation*

The pattern is not restricted to the verb *enjoy* or to a single publication. It is also attested with other lexical verbs such as *receive*, *give* and *experience* across multiple independent sources, suggesting that it is a more general property of stranded lexical verbs in comparative environments.

(10) Developments on a scale like this will challenge the entire international system and merit much greater attention than they receive here. (*The Wall Street Journal*, 23 April 2018)

[2] Following Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* (2002), a *comparative governor* (e.g. *same*, *such*, *-er, more*) is an item that licenses a *comparative phrase*, i.e. a phrase containing the comparative governor. The *comparative complement* corresponds to the *comparative clause* (typically introduced by *than* or *as*) that functions as the complement of the comparative phrase.

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(11) Even though the credit markets give the government more latitude than they give to ordinary individuals, the government still faces limits. (*The New York Times*, 30 March, 2013)

(12) People entering the labor force should expect to encounter a more strategic and self-serving mindset than they experience in purely social ... (*The Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 2015)

The pattern is also attested in quoted speech:

(13) "This work would be resource hungry and may not be able to deliver any further fishing opportunities to our fishermen than they enjoy under the current system," she said. (BBC, 14 Feb. 2013)

The examples in (3)–(13) have one thing in common. The comparative gap is an internal argument of the stranded lexical verb and the missing element corresponds to the X that is modified by the comparative governor. For example, in (3) the structure is *same X as they enjoy* __.

In fact, *CGEL* (p. 1138) illustrates this mechanism and acknowledges that *same* can occur with *as* + comparative clause:

(14) They behaved in the same way as you had predicted __ .

Additionally, *CGEL* (p. 1142) provides similar examples for *such as* with comparative clause:

(15) Would you yourself follow such advice as you give me __?

(16) Applications shall be made in accordance with such regulations as the Secretary to the Treasury may prescribe __ .

The *CGEL* examples in (14)–(16) suggest that the pattern is already implicitly acknowledged in the grammar. The attested examples in (3)–(13) extend this observation by showing stranded lexical verbs in comparative constructions without auxiliary support.

What makes (1) ungrammatical in a comparative is that the NP is outside the comparative phrase (reproduced here):

(17) *I didn't enjoy the concert as much as [Kim had enjoyed __].

Acknowledging that lexical verbs can be stranded in certain comparative constructions can shed light to the second mystery of why *do so* seems admissible in the following attested examples.

3. Attested counterexamples of *do so* in comparative constructions

Although many examples are drawn from *The Economist*, the pattern is also attested in independent sources, including the BBC, *The New Yorker*, *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) and *The Wall Street Journal.*

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3.1. More X .. than do so

(18) Until road safety is a priority for governments in developing countries, more people will continue to die than do so from malaria or AIDS. (*The Economist*, 22 Oct. 2015)

(19) But in America and Scandinavia couples are likelier to have more children if their early ones are male, suggesting that more keep trying for a girl than do so for a boy. (*The Economist*, 5 June 2025)

(20) Whatever the outcome of the referendum, Sunni representation in the next parliament will rise, due to improvements in the voting system to make representation more proportional and because more Sunni groups are expected to take part in December's general election than did so in January's. (*The Economist*, 4 Oct. 2005)

(21) At the same time, both Savanta ComRes and Survation say that now more voters regard Mr Sarwar favourably (27% on average) than do so unfavourably (22%). (BBC, 27 April 2021)

(22) Nowhere on earth do more millionaires and billionaires go to work every day than do so here – about twenty-two hundred of the fifteen thousand employees own at least a million dollars' worth of Microsoft stock – but the campus is in no respect worldly. (*The New Yorker*, 26 December 1993)

3.2. -er X .. than do so

(23) Only about half of British households pay for television – a much smaller proportion than do so in America – and the proportion is not expected to grow much soon. (*The Economist*, 9 Feb. 2013)

(24) On Valentine's Day last year just over 8m people used London's buses and tube network, around 22% fewer than did so on the same day in 2020. (*The Economist*, 9 Feb. 2024)

(25) Therefore, if equal numbers of girls landed on top, larger numbers would likely become scientists and engineers than do so now. (*The Wall Street Journal*, 28 Jan. 2005)

(26) Relaxing U.S. disclosure requirements right now would result in a greater number of issuers choosing to access the U.S. market than do so under the current requirement. (COCA)

3.3. Less X .. than do so

(27) Traffic engineers reckon that 30% less cars and lorries are now using Exhibition Road than did so before the change. (*The Economist*, 28 April 2012)

The attested examples involve a subject gap external to the VP anaphor *do so*, while the missing element is interpreted from material contained within the comparative phrase. For example, the structure in (18) is *more X will continue to die than __ do so.*

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This analysis is consistent with the known restriction in comparatives that the counterpart of the comparative phrase must be left implicit. Consider again example (18) reproduced here:

(28) Until road safety is a priority for governments in developing countries, more people will continue to die than __ do so from malaria or AIDS.

You cannot say: **... more people will continue to die than people do so from malaria or AIDS.* The comparative counterpart must not be expressed.

So we can see why example (2) from *CGEL* with *do so* is ungrammatical, reproduced below:

(29) (a) She earns more than I do/ *than I do so.
(b) He thought it was good, as I did/ *as I did so.

The ungrammaticality of (29a) follows because there is no gap outside the VP. In the attested examples, the gap is external to the VP, normally the subject. Unlike the lexical-verb cases, *do so* cannot contain the missing object counterpart: *do so* replaces the VP.

4. Revised generalization

The attested examples presented here suggest that stranded lexical verbs and *do so* may occur in certain comparative constructions under identifiable structural conditions. In the lexical-verb cases, the comparative phrase contains material corresponding to an argument position of the stranded lexical verb in the comparative clause. In the *do so* cases, the comparative construction likewise involves a subject gap external to the VP, with *do so* replacing the VP. The missing element is interpreted from the material contained within the comparative phrase.

5. Conclusion

The attested examples presented here show that lexical verbs may be stranded and that *do so* may occur in certain comparative constructions. The present analysis therefore refines *CGEL*'s description of comparative constructions rather than contradicting it. Although this article does not attempt to provide a full account of the syntax and semantics of comparatives, it identifies structural patterns under which lexical verb stranding and *do so* substitution are permitted. This observation contributes to a more precise understanding of the distribution of these constructions within the comparative system.

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