

Two Readings For Universal Modals In Comparative Clauses

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Universal modals (such as 'should' and 'have to') in comparative clauses display an intriguing split in their interpretive behavior. Whereas (1) asserts that John's height is greater than the maximum permissible height (i.e., that he is too tall), (2) asserts that John's height is greater than the minimum permissible height (i.e., that he is tall enough).

(Scenario: John wants to be a jet pilot. Air Force regulations require all jet pilots to be between 5'6" and 6' tall.)

(1) John is taller than he should be.

(2) John is taller than he has to be.

Recent approaches to this problem either fail to account for the greater-than-minimum reading for (2), or else wrongly predict that (1) and (2) should exhibit both sorts of readings. We argue for an analysis that traces the difference between (1) and (2) to independent differences amongst the two classes of modals. Our analysis correctly captures the observed distribution of readings; furthermore, it is consistent with a variety of analyses for the semantics of comparative constructions. We take the latter fact to be of particular importance, given recent cross-linguistic investigations into the semantics of comparison.