This paper aims to study the comparative constructions in Amis and Kavalan, two Formosan (Austronesian) languages spoken in Taiwan. Two research questions will be addressed: 1) With respect to the essential components in a comparison, namely the comparative predicate, the comparee NP and the standard NP, how do they interact with each other in Amis and Kavalan in terms of predication, case assignment and word order? 2) From the perspective of typological analysis (cf. Greenberg 1966; Lehimann 1972; Andersen 1983; Stassen 1985), how do these two languages differ from each other in comparative constructions?

In this paper, we will show that while Kavalan mainly employs a strategy of addity of a standard NP without resorting to any comparative affix or particle, Amis marks the comparison by means of an “exceed”-verb.

In Kavalan, the comparative construction as exemplified in (1) does not differ from a non-comparative counterpart (2) except for one added new argument NP.

(1) comparative construction in Kavalan
ai
ku nengi tu kaput-ku
1Sg.NOM good OBL friend-1Sg.GEN
‘I’m better than my friend.’

(2) non-comparative construction in Kavalan
nengi kaput-ku
good friend-1Sg.GEN
‘My friend is good.’

As shown above, the comparative predicate does not undergo some morphological processes as in English, where a comparative predicate either needs a suffix –er (e.g., Susan is smarter than his father), or must be modified by an adverb such as more or less (e.g., Peter is more ambitious than anyone I have ever met).

Amis, unlike Kavalan, has two comparative constructions: ‘ki’ comparatives and ‘ikaka/isafa’ comparatives. The first type employs a special verbal affix ‘-ki-’ by which the whole verbal expression turns into a transitive event, no matter it is in Agent Focus/Voice (AF) or in Patient Focus/Voice. The second type is involved with a pair of lexical items ‘ikaka/isafa’ which serves as the main predicate of the construction. The examples are shown below.
(3) ‘ki’ comparatives in Amis
   a. mi-ki-lalok ci Aki ci-Mayaw-an
      AF-exceed-diligent NCM.SG.NOM Aki OBL-Mayaw-OBL
      ‘Aki is more diligent than Mayaw.’
   b. ma-ki-lalok ni Aki ci Mayaw
      PF-exceed-diligent NCM.SG.GEN Aki NCM.SG.NOM Mayaw
      ‘Aki is more diligent than Mayaw.’

(4) ‘ikaka/isafa’ comparatives in Amis
   ikaka/isafa ku fana’ ni mama aku tisuwanan
   exceed/inferior.to NOM know NCM.SG.GEN father 1SG.GEN 2SG.OBL
   ‘My father knows more/less than you do.’

In this paper we will also classify these comparative constructions following Stassen’s comparative typology by which its applicability will be re-examined. In addition, we will explore relevant issues regarding the syntactic theory of comparatives such as event-comparison, ellipsis, and ambiguity. Finally, a discussion from a semantic-pragmatic perspective will be addressed in order to discover the underlying principles responsible for the comparatives in use. By a close investigation of the interaction of form and function, it is suggested that the selection of a comparative construction is cognitively motivated rather than random.

References: