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Comparative constructions in Suansu and the languages of northeastern India

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Abstract

This paper provides a first description of comparative constructions in Suansu, an unreported Tibeto-Burman language spoken in northeastern India, and frames the characteristics of Suansu comparative constructions from a typological perspective (following Stassen's 1985 classification). To this purpose, comparative constructions from a sample of 25 Tibeto-Burman languages of the area are collected in an ad-hoc designed database and typologically discussed. Results reveal the presence of two main types that cluster geographically in the region, as well as high internal variation with respect to the subtypes. Based on the classification, Suansu is assigned to the Exceed comparative type, the only representative of this type in the sample.

Keywords: Suansu; Tibeto-Burman; typology; comparative constructions; language documentation.

1. Introduction

Comparison can be defined as a "mental act where two elements occupy a symmetric or asymmetric position on a specific property predicative scale" (Treis 2018: I): this mental act is linguistically encoded by comparison constructions. Several types of comparison structures have been distinguished in the literature. Based on the subdivision proposed by Fuchs (2014) and implemented in Treis (2018), this study focusses on comparison of inequality, and specifically on comparison of relative superiority. The default template for constructions of relative superiority (hence, comparative constructions) is exemplified by structures such as *X is bigger than Y* or *X is more intelligent than Y*.

The linguistic literature has proposed several terms to define the elements of prototypical comparative constructions. The terminology adopted in this study relies on Treis (2018: I), where the following elements are distinguished: COMPAREE (the entity being compared: *X*); STANDARD (what the compared is being compared to: *Y*); standard marker (grammatical function of the standard: *than*); PARAMETER (the property of comparison: *tall, intelligent*); DEGREE (the degree of presence of a property in the comparee: *-er, more*).

This aim of the present study is two-fold. Firstly, to describe the comparative constructions in Suansu, a virtually undescribed Tibeto-Burman language from northeastern India. The second objective is to explore the structural variation of comparative constructions of other 24[1] Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the same area, to frame their typology, and outline the geographical distribution of the identified types.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1.1. summarizes and discusses the classification of comparative constructions outlined in Stassen (1985), that is the typology adopted in this study. In Section 2, I briefly introduce Suansu language, and report a first profile of Suansu comparative constructions (2.1.). The second part of the study (Section 3) is dedicated to the description of comparative constructions across 24 Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in northeastern India. In Section 3.1., the methodological approach used for the cross-linguistic data exploration and the database design are briefly illustrated. Section 3.2. describes the expression of comparative constructions in the Tibeto-Burman sample. Section 4 discusses the types attested in the area, and Suansu comparative constructions are included in the typology. The paper concludes (Section 5) with a summary of the typological findings and sets the ground for further typological research on the topic.

1.1. Background

There is broad and rich literature available on the expression of comparative constructions, from theoretical approaches to language specific overviews, as well as typological research. Typological classifications of comparative constructions have a long tradition and include the works of Ultan (1972), Heine (1997), Stassen (1985), and Dixon (2008), among others (see Stolz 2013 & Treis 2018 for a review).

[1] In an earlier version of this study, the sample included three more languages from the Tani subgroup (Tawrã, Upper Adi and Mising), which were later excluded because the cited grammars have been contested as unreliable.

The present study follows the typology of comparative constructions outlined by Stassen (1985), with additional input from Stolz (2013). The types identified in Stassen's typology are summarized in Table 1.

Taxonomy	**Types**
Fixed-case comparatives	a) Exceed b) Adverbial • Allative • Locational • Separative
Derived-case comparatives	a) Conjoined b) Particle

Table 1: Taxonomy of Stassen's typology.

Stassen's typology (as well as several other classifications, e.g., Dixon 2008) is mostly grounded on the etymological and semantic properties of the constructions found on the standard of comparison. Based on these properties, Stassen distinguishes between two main types: derived-case and fixed-case comparatives, with the main criterion behind the partition being whether the case of the standard is dependent or independent from the comparee.

Within the fixed-case comparatives, Stassen differentiates further in Exceed and Adverbial comparatives (the latter relabeled Locational in Stassen 2013). Derived-case comparatives include Conjoined and Particle comparatives subtypes.

Exceed comparatives are characterized by the presence of a transitive verb with the meaning of 'exceed' and 'surpass', with the comparee and the standard of comparison being the subject and the object, respectively. Conjoined comparatives, on the other hand, are formed by two independent clauses, one containing the comparee and the other the standard, with the parameter present in both; the clauses are in adversative relation.

Most of the languages identified in this study fall into Stassen's Adverbial/Locational (henceforth, Adverbial) and Particle types. The Adverbial comparative type includes three subtypes: the Separative comparatives (Stassen 1985: 114–135), where the standard of comparison is marked through a morpheme of source and origin. Stassen provides as examples of standard markers ablative forms

such as 'from'.[2] Comparatives of this subtype are found in Kambaata (Afroasiatic, Cushitic, Treis 2018) and several Athabascan languages (Koyukon, Tanana and Athan among others, Tuttle 2018).

The second subtype within the Adverbial type is the Allative comparative. In Stassen's classification, Allative comparatives mark the standard of comparison as a goal, benefactive or direct object (Stassen 1985: 136–145).

The third subtype within the Adverbial type is the Locative comparative (Stassen 1985: 146–152), and the standard is marked with an element that indicates contact or static location ('on', 'at', 'beside'), usually derived from locational adverbs.

Derived-case comparatives include the above-mentioned Conjoined comparatives and Particle comparatives. The Particle type, according to Stassen's classification, includes a comparative marker that "does not influence the case marking of the standard" (Treis 2018: II). These heterogeneous particles include, among others, disjunctive forms, negators and coordinators.

The above typology leaves some questions unresolved (c.f. Stassen 1985; Heine 1997; Stolz 2013). One potential source of ambiguity pertains to the heterogeneity of the types identified in the typology: Stassen explicitly mentions "sources of indeterminacy" (Stassen 1985: 36) with respect to the Adverbial comparatives, stressing the semantic variation of the standard markers categorized under this type, and which further segmentation would lead to "a proliferation of other subclasses" (Stassen 1985: 36). The Particle type encounters similar limitations, being "not a homogeneous class" (Stassen 1985: 46), and often characterized by "etymologically nontransparent forms" (Heine 1997: 120), which at times "cannot be associated with any co-existing functional element of the language in which they occur" (Stolz 2013: 21). The heterogeneous nature of the Particle type, combined with a general opaqueness of the constructions included to the type, prompted the introduction of further subclassifications. Additional subtypes have indeed been proposed, and only two types are relevant to this study. The first is the Pure comparative type introduced by Stolz (2013: 22), that includes the constructions in which the standard is marked by a dedicated comparative marker. The second subtype is the Companion Schema by Heine (1997: 93–94), that comprises constructions with comitative and instrumental forms marked on the standard of comparison. Comitative marking on the standard, considered typologically rare, is tentatively included by Stassen (1985: 37) under the Separative comparatives, but it is not discussed further.

[2] In Stassen's terminology, marking is intended in broad morphological and non-morphological sense.

Both Heine and Stassen, as well as most of the typological classifications, do not include in their respective typologies the forms found outside the standard (one exception being Bobaljik 2012). Parameters such as the presence or the morphological characteristics of the degree markers are often discarded (Treis 2018: IX). This study follows Stassen's typology, and therefore the degree markers will not be discussed in detail nor incorporated in the classification. However, considering potential future updates in the typology of comparative constructions, the variables and properties related to the degree, comparee, and parameter have been collected in a detailed database (Section 3.1).

2. Suansu language

Suansu is an endangered Tibeto-Burman language spoken in a small cluster of villages in Manipur, northeastern India. Suansu has approximately 2200[3] speakers, located in the Ukhrul district of Manipur, not far from the Myanmar border.

Suansu is currently virtually undescribed in the literature. Suansu features comprise strict verb-final word order, a rich case marking system, and ergative - absolutive alignment. Ergative marking appears to be motivated by pragmatic and/or semantic factors, consistent with several other Tibeto-Burman languages (DeLancey 2011). Further features align Suansu to the scarce typology available on the languages of the eastern border area (Burling 2003b: 173). These include the presence of three lexical tones, noun compounding strategies and frequent "frozen prefixes" (Marrison 1967: 108) attached to verbs, nouns and adjectives (with unclear semantic distribution). Other common traits within the languages of the area and attested in Suansu include a rich verb morphology, with several affixes (mostly suffixes), and the absence of verb agreement altogether.

The linguistic data on Suansu used in this study has been collected between 2017 and 2019, during several fieldwork trips to Pune, Maharashtra, where a heterogeneous Suansu speaking community works and lives. Part of the data has been time-aligned, transcribed and annotated; specific examples here reported are drawn from a corpus that includes narratives, folk tales and elicited examples from three different native speakers.

[3] According to the most recent public Census available, the 2011 Indian Census: http://censusindia.gov.in.

2.1. Comparative constructions in Suansu

The present Section outlines a first report on comparative constructions in Suansu. Being a first report on the language, the description that follows should be treated as preliminary, and has no claim of exhaustivity.

The word order template for Suansu comparative constructions is structured as follows: COMPAREE - STANDARD - PARAMETER - DEGREE MARKER. An example is illustrated in (1).

(1) *ha-ʃi-ne* *nɔ-ʃi-di* *tʰazu* *mɛn-le*
1PL-house-ERG 2SG-house-ABS beautiful more-be.PRS
'Our house is more beautiful than your house.'

The comparee is morphologically marked by the suffix *ne*, which is used in Suansu to mark ergative case and A in general (2). The standard immediately follows the comparee and is suffixed by the absolutive marker *di*, which covers P (2), S (3), and experiencer (4).

(2) *ba-ne* *klui-di* *kətərum-no* *huamsuɛ*
3SG-ERG rope-ABS tree-LOC tie.PST
'She/He tied the rope to the tree.'

(3) *hai* *həma-di* *mari-də* *samhai*
DET pot-ABS iron-INS make.PST
'This pot is made of iron.'

(4) *gəpʰem-di* *miŋə-le*
ice-ABS melt-PRS
'Ice melts.'

The word order template illustrated above is not strict, and the standard can be found preceding the comparee, as illustrated in (5). Further research is needed for a better understanding of the word order distributions in Suansu.

(5) *pjəs-di* *kaminta-ne* *am:etok^{h}* *mɛn-le* *ʔasə*
onion-ABS tomato-ERG expensive more-be.PRS today
'Tomatoes are more expensive than onions today.'

Overt marking on the comparee is not obligatory in Suansu comparative constructions (6), as ergative marking can be optional in general (7); more data is required to account for the distributional trends and occurrences of this marker, although first insights from the data available seem to suggest that the presence of agent marking is motivated by pragmatic contexts.

(6) *ha-ʃi* *nɔ-ʃi-di* *tʃutʃu* *mɛn-le*
1PL-house 2SG-house-ABS small more-be.PRS
'Our house is smaller than yours.'

(7) *ba* *tatʃu-di* *dukan-də* *lu-le*
3SG rice-ABS market-ABL buy-PRS
'She/He buys rice at (from) the market.'

The parameter is followed by the particle *mɛn*: the meaning can be linked, based on the occurrences of the form found elsewhere in the grammar, to 'more' (8).

(8) *ha* *ɬo* *tʃõ* *mɛn* *laŋe* *dorgat^{h}e* *le*
1PL field CLF more cultivate need be.PRS
'We need to cultivate more land.'

At the state of the art, the origin of *mɛn* is unclear: it is not linked to any spatial nor locational particle found in the data and it does not find correspondences in Tangkhul, the predominant linguistic neighbor. The particle *mɛn*, used in combination with the verb *le*, 'to be', acquires the meaning of 'to be more', 'exceed', as shown in the following non-comparative example (9).

(9) *asserikom-va* *taciu-di* *assokom-va-ne* mɛn-*le*
last.year-GEN grain-ABS present.year-GEN-ERG more-be.PRS
'This year's harvest surpassed last year's harvest.'

Similar particles, possibly related, are attested in the neighboring languages spoken in the Ukhrul district. Examples include Huishu (*kʰə-mu* 'more than', Mortensen 2013), Kachai (*kʰə-mi* 'more than', Mortensen 2013), Tusom (*cũ-kʰə-ma* 'more than', Mortensen 2013), Ukhrul (*kʰə-mɒj* 'to be more', Mortensen 2013). These forms suggest a hypothesized Proto-Tangkhulic *mej 'more' (Mortensen 2013: 402). Data on these languages is limited to wordlists and does not contain grammatical information on these forms.

In Suansu comparative constructions, the standard is constructed as the direct object, with the comparee as the subject. The transitive predicate suggests a meaning related to 'exceed', 'surpass', construed through the particle *mɛn* and the verb form *le,* 'to be'.

Thus, Suansu comparative constructions can be assigned to the Exceed comparative type defined in Stassen's typology. This assignment confirms Stassen's findings on the geographical distribution of this type, whose presence seems restricted to two geographical areas, sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia. In the following Section, I turn to other languages of the eastern border area and the respective comparative constructions.

3. Comparative constructions in the languages of northeastern India

3.1. Methodology

In what follows, I present data on comparative constructions from 24 Tibeto-Burman languages (25 including Suansu). With a few exceptions, the languages are spoken in northeastern India: the sample includes languages spoken in the fringes of this region, such as Myanmar and the Himalayan range.

The languages of the sample belong to different branches within the Tibeto-Burman sub-family.[4] Kuki-Chin-Naga and Brahmaputran are the most represented subgroups in the sample, followed by Mruic. Other genealogical subgroups, such as Bodic, Kiranti, Burmo-Qiangic, Karenic, Macro-Tani, and Raji, are also represented, although with fewer languages. The main criteria for language selection include their location (northeastern India) and the availability of the sources. The detailed sample, grouped by linguistic subgroup, is illustrated in Table 2.

[4] Genealogical affiliations follow the classification reported on Glottolog (Hammarström et al. 2020).

Subgroup	**Languages**
Bodic (1)	Bunan (gahr1239)
Brahmaputran (7)	Atong (aton1241), Chothe (chot1239), Garo (garo1247), Kadu (kado1242), Konyak (kony1248), Turung (sing1264), Rabha (rabh1238)
Kiranti (2)	Chintang (chhi1245), Yakkha (yakk1236)
Karenic (2)	Geba Karen (geba1237), Kayah Monu (kaya1316)
Kuki-Chin-Naga (6)	Karbi (karb1241), Mao Naga (maon1238), Mongsen Ao (aona1235), Moyon (moyo1238), Suansu (suan1234), Tangkhul (tang1336)
Macro-Tani (3)	Apatani (apat1240), Galo (galo1242), Tangam (tang1377)
Mruic (2)	Hkongso (anuu1241), Mru (mruu1242)
Burmo-Qiangic (1)	Burmese (nucl1310)
Raji-Raute (1)	Raji (rawa1264)

Table 2: Language sample by genealogical subgroup.

The linguistic data is collected in a multivariate typological database. The primary goal of the database is to collect information on comparative constructions at the most refined level of detail.[5] The methodology adopted in designing the database relies on the autotypologizing method and the late aggregation principles. The autotypologizing method (Bickel & Nichols 2002) describes a bottom-up, data-driven approach that starts at the earliest stages of data collection. Instead of "fitting" the structures found in the languages of the sample in a "conceptual grid" of traits established a priori, the constructions are collected dynamically, along with the data collection process (in a multivariate approach fashion, cf. Bickel 2010a; Bickel 2010b). Results from the data are eventually framed within the types identified in the literature at a later phase (following the principle of late aggregation, see Bickel et al. 2016). These methods have shown their potential in several typological databases (Bickel et al. 2017; Ivani & Zakharko 2019); in addition, the granularity of the data collected enables its reusability for further research.

The data collection procedure is structured as follows. For each language, I describe in detail the structures that characterize the respective comparative construction. The forms and types illustrated in the database encompass both morphological and non-

[5] The database is stored and freely accessible on GitHub (https://github.com/jkivani/coi-neils). The dataset version for the present study (Ivani 2020) is available on the public access Zenodo repository (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4274488).

morphological means used to define the relations among the comparee, the standard and the parameter.

Each construction is stored with a set of metadata information: these include an identifier, the respective language name (with the related Glottocode), and the language genealogical subgroup. The identifier is unique, but it can be shared by several constructions in different languages in cases of attested cognacy relationships. Linguistic information includes the language specific form, the type of marker, the locus, and the function or meaning (when available), associated to the form in the grammar. Table 3 exemplifies the coding sheet for Atong language. The forms individuated during the data collection process are then assigned to the pre-existing typology described in Section 1.1. and then discussed further.

ID	Glottocode	Language	Subgroup	Form	Type	Locus	Function	Source
ID003	aton1241	Atong	Brahmaputran	*-na*	suffix	standard	goal	Van Breugel 2014
ID004	aton1241	Atong	Brahmaputran	*-khal*	suffix	parameter	more	Van Breugel 2014

Table 3: Coding sheet for Atong language.

3.2. Data overview

The data available on comparative constructions in the languages of the sample reveals interesting structural variation. In what follows, I present cases from individual languages by genealogical subgroup, and describe the strategies used to express the respective comparative constructions.[6]

The Tani languages of the sample, spoken mostly in Arunachal Pradesh, are Apatani, Tangam, and Galo. All the Macro-Tani languages included in the sample share a degree marker, *ya* in Apatani, *yaŋ* in Tangam, and *jaa* in Galo. The meaning of this form seems to be 'more', as reported in the linguistic sources, and it is linked to the Proto Tani form *jaŋ (Sun 1993: 122). All three languages show the same

[6] The examples from the individual languages are reported *verbatim*, with the original glosses described in the respective sources, without any relabeling, except for minor normalization adjustments.

behavior in expressing comparison. In addition to the degree marker, Apatani comparative constructions have a standard marker, *mi* (10), and it is linked to functions such as non-agentive and direct object, among others.[7]

(10) Apatani (Macro-Tani; Abraham 1985: 136)
mado *rinyo-mi* *ka-pyo* *ya-do*
mado rynio-ACC see-good COMP-exist
'Mado is more beautiful than Rynio.'

Similarly, the standard of comparison in both Tangam and Galo comparative constructions is marked by a non-agentive relational marker: the form corresponds to the postposition *me* in Tangam and the clitic *nè* in Galo, related in form and function to the marker found in Apatani. In both languages, the distribution of the non-agentive and the accusative is semantically controlled by the definiteness and the animacy of the referent (Post 2017: 102).[8] This restriction is reflected in the respective comparative constructions. In example (11), the only sentence available from Galo sources where all the elements of the comparative construction are expressed overtly, the accusative clitic *əəm* is used on the standard, being the standard of comparison a non-human noun. The non-agentive postposition is found on the human referent in the example from Tangam (12).

(11) Galo (Macro-Tani; Post 2007: 548)
…takə́ = əəm *dór-tə̀-jàa-dó(o)-nà = əə = na*
…squirrel = ACC CLF:HIGH.ANIMAL-big-COMP-STAT-NZR:SUB = COP.IPFV = DECL
'…you know, they're bigger than squirrels.'

(12) Tangam (Macro-Tani; Post 2017: 128)
nodɨ *ŋo = me* *abəŋ-yaŋ-du(ŋ)*
3SG 1SG = NAGT mature-COMP-IPFV
'He is elder to me.'

[7] A reviewer suggests caution in using Abraham (1985) as a source and recommends consulting in parallel other sources and descriptions treating related languages. The functions listed here rely on Simon (1972: 5) and through comparison with Galo and Tangam.

[8] Both languages include dative and locational forms in their respective referential marking systems. See Post (2007: 58) for Galo and Post (2017: 108) for Tangam language.

The Brahmaputran languages Atong, Garo and Rabha employ the marker *na* (cliticized in Atong) which covers, in the three languages, goal, indirect object, and beneficiary role. In addition, the languages show variation with respect to the marking combination in the respective comparative constructions. In Atong, the dative form is suffixed to the standard (13). The dative suffix in Garo is used in combination with *bate* (14), whose meaning is glossed 'as compared to'. This marker operates as a dedicated form used in Garo comparative constructions (Burling 1961: 46). Furthermore, Atong presents the suffix *khal*, that occurs on the parameter. The form, used for generic intensification and meaning 'more', is a degree marker (Burling 2003a: 99).

(13) Atong (Brahmaputran; Van Breugel 2014: 278)
aŋ *naŋʔ=na* *cuŋ-khal=a*
1SG 2SG=GOAL big-COMP=CUST
'I am bigger than you.'

(14) Garo (Brahmaputran; Burling 1961: 19)
acak-na-bate *moiyr* *da'r-bate*
dog-GOAL-COMP elephant big-COMP
'An elephant is bigger than a dog.'

A suffixal compounding strategy analogous to the one illustrated for Garo, is found in Rabha (15). Rabha comprises affixal particles and postpositions that are used in combination with case markers to accomplish a more specific meaning or function. In Rabha comparative constructions, the dative *na* on the standard is followed by the particle *kára*, 'above, over', which appears to be partially grammaticalized (Joseph 2007: 762).

(15) Rabha (Brahmaputran; Joseph 2007: 360)
e-kai *pan* *o-kai* *pan-na* *kára* *cuh-a*
this-ATTR tree that-ATTR tree-DAT more big-PRS
'This tree is bigger than that tree.'

The other Brahmaputran languages of the sample, Kadu and Konyak, show a range of strategies in the respective comparative constructions that differ from the cases

illustrated above. In Kadu, the clitic *athá* follows obligatorily the standard and is of unclear origin: its use seems to be restricted to the marking of comparison. A topic marker, *ká*, is optionally found on the comparee (Sangdong 2012: 331).

Konyak (16) uses the form *phəy* (Nagaraja 2010: 59) suffixed to the standard; *phəy* is used elsewhere in the grammar to signal the "inanimate force or object casually involved in the action or state identified by the verb" (Nagaraja 2010: 62). In addition, *phəy* covers sociative and instrumental marking (excluding causal, goal and source functions, Nagaraja 2010: 69). The marker *phəy* is homophonous with the adverb *phəy*, 'behind', used also in combination with the locative marker *me* such as in *nòkphəyme*, 'behind the house' (Nagaraja 2010: 68), for which I assume that it is the etymological source of the standard marker in Konyak. In addition, the form *si*, possibly a degree marker, is prefixed to the parameter.

(16) Konyak (Brahmaputran; Nagaraja 2010:155)
kùy-ə *əmi-phəy* *si-yòŋ*
dog-NOM cat-with COMP-big
'The dog is bigger than the cat'

In Turung, the standard is followed by the particle *ngga* (or *nloh*), that corresponds to 'more'. The comparee is marked by the agentive/ergative marker *î* (17).

(17) Turung (Brahmaputran; Morey 2010:296)
Kon Kham î Kon Seng ngga coh
Kon Kham AG Kon Seng COMP tall
'Kon Kham is taller than Kon Seng.'

No further information nor additional occurrences are available on the form *tre*, the standard marker in Chothe (Singh 2000: 271). The suffix *he* on the parameter is reported with the meaning of 'excessive' (Singh 2000: 215). The comparee carries the nominative marker *na*.

In Bunan (18), the standard is marked by both the dative clitic *tok* and the ablative *tɕi*. The two forms combined indicate "a motion away from a generic location" (Widmer 2014: 237). A similar strategy is found in Chintang (Kiranti). Chintang (19) has an extensive case marking system (Paudyal 2015: 42), and the standard in the comparative constructions is suffixed by *ʔ*, that is the marker of focussed, specific

location, followed by *ya*, that expresses instrumental force (Paudyal 2015: 44). In Yakkha, the other Kiranti language of the sample, comparative constructions are expressed through the particles *haʔniŋ* and *haksaŋ* (in free distribution). Schackow (2015: 145) discusses possible meanings of the form, the most likely candidate being the verbal stem *haks* ‘send, send up’, but also ‘weigh’.

(18) Bunan (Bodic; Widmer 2014: 328)
tedzi=tsuk *tete* *gi=tok=tɕi* *tedzi jen*
big=REL grandfather 1SG=DAT=ABL big EQ.CJ
‘The older grandfather (of yours) is older than me.’

(19) Chintang (Kiranti; Paudyal 2015: 49)
hani-ʔ-yã *the=kha*
2s-LOC-ABL big=NZR
‘Bigger than you.’

The Mruic languages Hkongso (20) and Mru (21), closely related to each other, employ the particles *luki* and *lake*, that follow the standard in their respective comparative constructions. These forms have been linked to *luk* (Wright 2009: 66), that has the temporal and locative meaning of ‘side’. The particle has the additional meaning ‘more’, as attested in expressions such as *la luk* lit. ‘month more’, “next month” (Wright 2009: 34). Besides, Mru uses the particle *lang* meaning ‘different’ (Ebersole 1996: 9).

(20) Hkongso (Mruic; Wright 2009: 119)
dai˥ *cəʔ˩* *koko˧* *luk˩* *r̥ʰau˧*
dai TOP koko COMP tall
‘Dai is taller than Koko.’

(21) Mru (Mruic; Ebersole 1996: 17)
enning kim *lake* *anging kim* *lang* *iuk*
2PL house COMP 1PL house difference big
‘Our house is bigger than yours.’

Plural markers can be involved in comparative constructions: Raji-Raute language Raji, spoken in Uttarkand, uses the plural particle *jəmma* (Krishan 2001: 84), followed by the parameter (22).

(22) Raji (Raji-Raute; Krishan 2001: 84)
pəhare *ti* *gədde* *ti* *jəmma* *thənda* *hwā*
mountain water river water COMP cold COP
'Mountain water is colder than river water.'

The languages belonging to the Kuki-Chin-Naga subgroup show higher internal diversity, but scarce information is available on the respective comparative constructions in general. In Moyon, the particle *hak* is postponed to the parameter (e.g., *irun hək*, 'bigger', Devi 2010: 174). The particle can be also suffixed to the verbal root, where it covers an associative/collective function (*enno ensaʔhəkne* 'they eat together', Devi 2010: 84). The data available does not provide further information regarding the presence of additional markers in comparative constructions.

In Mao Naga, comparative constructions show the presence of the marker *zhü*, with the meaning of 'rather' (Giridhar 1994: 206). Mao Naga uses different particles to express an increasing level of intensity (Giridhar 1994: 373). The comparee is marked by *ko*; no further information is available on the structure of comparative constructions in Mao Naga.

Mongsen Ao (23) uses the comitative marker *thən* on the standard of comparison (Coupe 2007: 183). The marker *phān* found on the standard in Karbi (see example 24) is glossed as 'non subject': it is mainly used to mark O arguments, recipients and oblique participants (Konnerth 2014: 480).

(23) Mongsen Ao (Kuki-Chin-Naga; Coupe 2007: 293)
nì *sənti-pàʔ* *thən* *la* *tə-hláŋ-pàʔ*
1SG PN-M COM TOP NZP-be.long-NR
'I am taller than Sentiba.'

(24) Karbi (Kuki-Chin-Naga; Konnerth 2014: 454)
methān *a-phān-te* *ingnàr* *thè-mū*
dog POSS-NSUBJ-COND? elephant be.big-COMP
'Elephants are bigger than dogs.'

Tangkhul (25) marks the standard NP of comparative constructions with the suffix *ki*, which corresponds to the locative form meaning ‘on’ (Stassen 1985: 147).

(25) Tangkhul Naga (Kuki-Chin-Naga; Stassen 1985: 147)
Themma hau lu-ki vi-we
man this that-on good-COP
‘This man is better than that man’

Data on Karenic languages is limited. In Kayah Monu, comparative constructions display the particle *khlu* after the verb and before the standard (Wai 2013: 23). The particle is attested in Kayan Pekon with an adverbial function and translated with the meaning ‘more’ (Wai 2013: 35). No other means seem to be used in the expression of comparison of inequality, as shown in (26).

(26) Kayah Monu (Karenic; Wai 2013: 23)
hè sáplá khlù phàlú
1SG dejected ADV phalu
‘I am more dejected than Phalu.’

In Burmese, the only Burmo-Qiangic language of the sample, the standard is suffixed by the marker *hte?*, meaning ‘over’ (27).

(27) Burmese (Burmo-Qiangic: Stassen 1985: 126)
Thu-hte? pein-te
him-over be.thin-NONFUT
‘She is thinner than him.’

4. Data discussion

Following Stassen’s classification, the languages discussed in Section 3.2 can be assigned to the Adverbial and to the Particle types. Suansu is the only language among the ones described in this study that can be linked to the Exceed type. Table 4 illustrates the types and the related subtypes individuated for the languages of the sample.

Type (No. of languages)	**Languages**
Exceed (1)	Suansu
Adverbial: Allative (6)	Apatani, Atong, Galo, Garo, Karbi, Tangam
Adverbial: Locative (5)	Burmese, Hkongso, Mru, Rabha, Tangkhul
Adverbial: Separative (6)	Bunan, Chintang, Konyak, Mongsen Ao, Moyon, Yakkha
Particle (7)	Chothe, Geba Karen, Kayah Monu, Kadu, Mao Naga, Raji, Turung

Table 4: Typology and respective languages.

The most common type identified in the sample corresponds to the Adverbial type, which can be further distinguished in Allative, Separative and Locative subtypes.

Six languages belong to the Allative subtype. These include the Brahmaputran languages Atong and Garo, characterized by goal and benefactive forms marked on the standard of comparison. According to Stassen's typology, direct object markers are also classified within the Allative subtype, adding Tangam, Apatani, Galo and Karbi (Kuki-Chin-Naga) to the subtype.

Six languages from the sample belong to the Separative subtype within the Adverbial type. The Separative subtype comprises standard markers of source and origin. The Kiranti languages Yakkha and Chintang, as well as Konyak and Bunan belong to the Separative subtype. Comitative markers are also included within the Separative subtype in Stassen's typology, and they are attested in Mongsen Ao and Moyon through the forms *thən* and *hak* respectively. The marker *phəy* in Konyak has also a comitative meaning, and it is included in the Separative subtype. However, *phəy* somehow challenges the typology, since its original meaning is `behind', opening the interpretation of the marker as a locative particle and thus linking the form to the Locative subtype. Comitative markers used as standard markers in comparative constructions are found cross-linguistically, for example in Nuer (Nilotic, Ultan 1972), and Muna (Austronesian, Van Den Berg 2018), and they are considered rare.

Five languages are assigned to the Locative subtype. These include Rabha (Brahmaputran), Tangkhul (Kuki-Chin-Naga), Burmese,[9] and the Mruic languages Hkgonso and Mru. Within the Locative subtype, the markers on the standard have the

[9] Stassen (1985:40) includes Burmese comparative constructions under the Separative type. Since the form *hte?* indicates a spatial location ('over'), rather than "a motion away from a location" prototypical of the Separative subtype, I have reinterpreted Burmese comparative constructions under the Locative subtype.

function of a static spatial location 'on' and 'over' (*ki* in Tangkhul, *kára* in Rabha and *hte?* in Burmese), and 'side' (*lake* in Mruic).

The distribution of the types (and the related subtypes) reveals interesting aspects. Comparatives of the Allative subtype are found in 6 languages of the sample. This subtype is claimed to be rare in typological investigations (Stolz 2013: 19; Ultan 1972: 140). Stassen (1985: 40) reports the presence of the Allative comparative subtype in 7 languages out of the 110 that compose his sample. None of the languages listed by Stassen under the subtype is a Tibeto-Burman variety.[10] Based on his results, Stassen hypothesizes that the Allative subtype occurs in languages with basic verb-initial word order (Stassen 1985: 41). The cases illustrated above, from verb-final Tibeto-Burman languages, suggests that word order in general does not constrain the assignment to a specific comparative subtype, such as Allative.

Seven of the Tibeto-Burman languages explored in this study are assigned to the Particle comparative type. The Particle type is characterized by broad definitory criteria in Stassen's classification. The formal heterogeneity of the Particle type, combined with the scarce data available on the functions and meanings of the particles, makes this classification and the assignment of comparative constructions to this type blurred and tentative at times. Only a few languages of the Particle type provide detailed information on the respective comparative constructions. In some cases, the markers found in the languages assigned to this type do not seem to appear elsewhere in the grammar, suggesting the presence of dedicated comparative markers. Dedicated markers are referred to as Pure comparatives in Stolz's terms (see Section 1.1.). The particle *zhii*, glossed as 'rather', found in Mao Naga comparative constructions, appears to be a dedicated comparative marker. A similar specific comparative function can be hypothesized for the standard marker *tre* in Chothe.

Finally, the standard clitic *atha* found in Kadu comparative constructions, appears to be a dedicated comparative marker (Sangdong 2012: 331).

Degree markers do not constitute a parameter in Stassen's classification, and they are in general neglected from comparative constructions typologies (e.g., Dixon 2008). Degree markers are often hard to identify in linguistic sources. This aspect has been pointed out in the literature by Ultan (1972: 127), who has stressed the difficulties in distinguishing between standard and degree markers within languages.

[10] The languages that are listed by Stassen under the Allative subtype are Breton, Jacaltec, Kanuri, Maasai, Nuer, Siuslawan, and Tarascan.

Raji comparative constructions offer an example of this ambiguity. The form *jəmma* identified in Raji corresponds to the plural marker and is the only instance attested in the sample of a synchronic fully functional plural marker used in comparative constructions. This form is assigned to the Particle comparative type. Based on the shared meaning of 'moreness' and increased quantity in general that is conveyed both in plurality and asymmetric relations of comparison, I hypothesize a developing multipurpose function of this marker. From this perspective, the form *jəmma* acquires the meaning and functional properties of a degree marker rather than a standard marker, making its assignment to the Particle type more ambiguous.

Other markers from the languages assigned to the Particle type have a dubious status. In Turung, the post standard particle is glossed as 'more', and thus interpreted as a degree marker. Both Karenic languages of the sample, Geba Karen and Kayah Monu, appear to express comparison exclusively through a degree marker, *doli* and *khlù* respectively. These languages are tentatively assigned to the Particle type.

Degree markers are widespread across the sample and they often co-occur with other markers in comparative constructions. It is outside the scope of this study to propose a novel typology that would comprise the presence and the properties of degree markers, and this enterprise is left to future research. However, I report for exhaustivity the distribution of degree markers in the sample. Table 5 shows the number of languages with degree markers distributed over the identified types.

Type (No. of languages)	**No. of languages with degree markers**
Exceed (1)	0
Adverbial: Allative (6)	6
Adverbial: Locative (5)	0
Adverbial: Separative (6)	0
Particle (7)	7

Table 5: Typology and presence of degree markers.

Degree markers are found in half of the languages of the sample and appear to be absent in comparative constructions of the Locative and Separative subtypes. In these subtypes, the asymmetry between the comparee and the standard is made explicit by 'separative' and ablative morphemes in general. The Allative type, on the other hand, comprises standard markers related to goal, direct object and comitative forms, 'allowing' the presence of markers that overtly express the degree of comparison. The

locus of degree markers is usually on the parameter. Degree markers are also present in the languages assigned to the Particle type, either as standalone forms or in addition to other markers.

The presence of overt marking on the comparee is another parameter usually left unexplored in typological classifications of comparative constructions. Markers on the comparee are found on a small subset of 7 languages of the sample. Half of these languages belong to the Brahmaputran subgroup: the forms include topic markers, such as *ká* in Kadu (Sangdong 2012: 315) and *cə?* in Hkgonso (Wright 2009: 119). Other languages include Konyak, Chothe (Singh 2000: 271), and Suansu.

As shown in Section 2.1., Suansu comparative constructions (of the Exceed type) consist of a transitive predicate that takes the comparee as its subject and the standard as object. Ergative marking on the comparee outside a transitive predicative unit in a comparative construction is considered a typological oddity. It is found in Turung, where the ergative/agentive marker *î* is suffixed to the comparee, while the respective standard of comparison is followed by a particle meaning 'more'. A similar use of the ergative marker in a comparative construction has been reported by Jacques (2016) in Japhug (a Qiangic language spoken in Sichuan), where the functions and the possible diachronic pathways of evolution of this marker are presented and discussed extensively.

Given the types, it is possible to explore their genealogical and geographic distribution. Table 6 illustrates the breakdown of the types for each linguistic subgroup in the sample.

Subgroup	**Allative**	**Locative**	**Separative**	**Particle**	**Exceed**	**Total**
Bodic			1			1
Brahmaputran	2	1	1	3		7
Burmo-Qiangic		1				1
Karenic				2		2
Kiranti			2			2
Kuki-Chin-Naga	1	1	2	1	1	6
Macro-Tani	3					3
Mruic		2				2
Raji-Raute				1		1
						25

Table 6: Types per linguistic subgroup.

The sample is not genealogically balanced and is not fully representative of each linguistic subgroup; however, it allows for some qualitative considerations. Data from the Brahmaputran stock suggests high heterogeneity in the types (and subtypes) found within a genealogical stock. In the Brahmaputran stock, both the Adverbial and the Particle types are found, and the Adverbial type is represented by each of the respective subtypes. The same scenario is observed in Kuki-Chin-Naga, where all the main types -and subtypes- are found. The Mruic linguistic subgroup consists of 2 languages, Mru and Hkgonso, both included in the sample: they follow the Locative subtype. The Macro-Tani stock includes 12 languages (according to Glottolog, Hammarström et al. 2020), and three are included in the sample. These languages follow the Allative type.

Comparative structures tend to spread areally (Stassen: 1985; Dixon 2008: 813). The three main types, Adverbial, Particle and Exceed comparatives are plotted in Figure 2 to illustrate their geographical distribution.

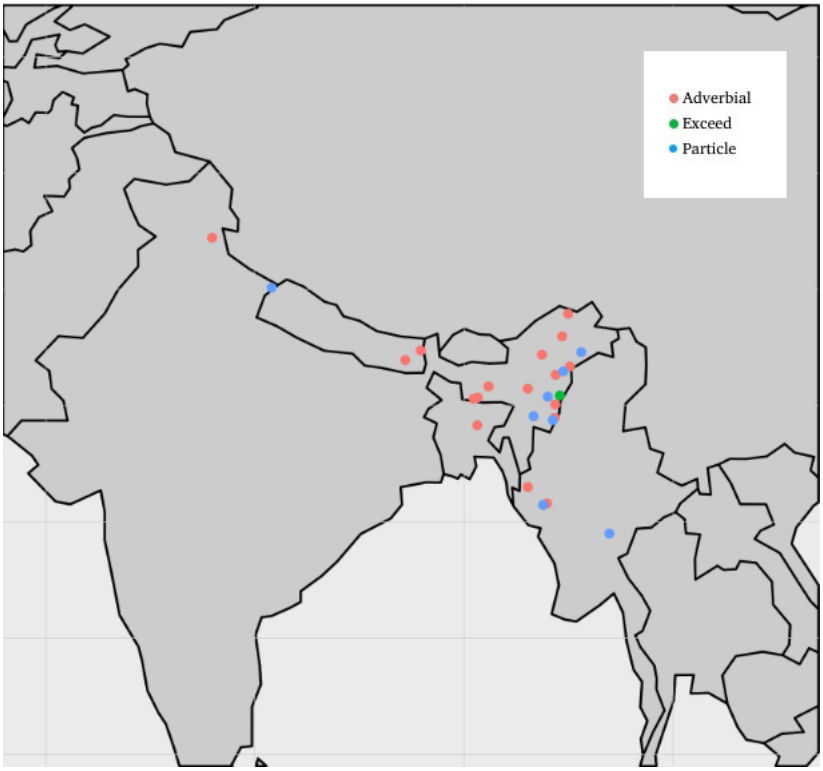

Figure 2: Geographical distribution of the types.

At a visual inspection, the geographical distribution of the main types suggests the presence of two clusters for the Adverbial and Particle types.[11] To assess the presence of the clusters, I test the plot through a specific visual statistical inference inspection process (Wickham et al. 2010), followed by a "Line Up" protocol (Kerman et al. 2008).

Visual statistical inference has the main purpose of bringing statistical support in quantifying the significance of structure in plots of data. It relies on the human capacity to spot visual trends in data, avoiding at the same time the risks of over-interpreting the patterns. Through this procedure, the plot representing the true data is placed among a set of randomly generated decoy data plots that support the null hypothesis (in the present case, no clustering). If the true data plot stands out from the rest in terms of representativity of the current hypothesis (here, the presence of two areal clusters), based on the judgment of a group of impartial and unbiased observers, one could consider this result as a rejection of the null hypothesis. This procedure is known as "Line-up", and the generated plot is found in the Appendix. The plot is generated using the R package `nullabor` (Buja et al. 2009). The true data plot is 12, and it passed the "Line-up" protocol test.

The Adverbial type clusters in the western part of the region. Comparative constructions of the Adverbial type are also widespread in the languages and language families of the Indian subcontinent (Stassen 2013). They are found, for example, in Hindi, Marathi and Bagri (Indo-Aryan), in the Dravidian languages Tamil and Telugu, and in Mundari and Santali (both belonging to the Munda branch of Austroasiatic). The languages of the sample located in the western part of the area contribute to this Adverbial comparative constructions *continuum*.

The Particle type clusters in the eastern part of the region and is assigned mainly to the Tibeto-Burman languages geographically contiguous to the Myanmar border, except for Raji, spoken in the western fringes of the targeted area and whose assignment to the Particle type is dubious. There is no detailed cross-linguistic information on the comparative types found in the linguistic stocks contiguous to the languages belonging to the Particle type.

Suansu is the only representative of the Exceed comparative in the sample. Outside the sample, comparatives of the Exceed type seem to be restricted to two geographical areas: South-East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Stassen 2013). Within South-East Asia, the Exceed type is attested in Mandarin, Thai, Khmer, and Vietnamese, among others. Further studies on lesser-known languages are required to assess the presence

[11] No significant clustering can be observed in the geographical distribution of the subtypes.

of this type in contiguous geographical areas such as southern China or northern Myanmar.

5. Concluding remarks

The main contributions of this paper are summarized in the following. Suansu comparative constructions, described for the first time in this study, can be typologically assigned to the Exceed comparative type in the classification proposed by Stassen.

Comparatives of the Exceed type are not found in Suansu genealogical and geographical linguistic neighbors. The cross-linguistic exploration of comparative constructions from a sample of Tibeto-Burman languages of northeastern India rather shows the presence of two main types: Adverbial and Particle types.

These types cluster geographically. The Adverbial type is found in the languages spoken in the western part of the region. This distribution is consistent with the extensive presence of comparative constructions of the Adverbial type found in the genealogically diverse languages spoken in South Asia (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Munda) and attested in the literature.

Comparative constructions of the Particle type are rather found in the eastern part of the region, and specifically in the languages spoken on the geographical and cultural border between South Asia and South-East Asia.

Comparative constructions of the Exceed type are not found outside Suansu; however, the presence of this type aligns with the assumptions in the cross-linguistic literature that describe the distribution of this type as geographically restricted to South-East Asia (and sub-Saharan Africa). The presence of the Exceed type comparative in Suansu might suggest a larger spread of this type, not limited to the 'core' South-East Asia, but also extended to the western fringes of the region.

A more general contribution to the typology of comparative constructions pertains to the presence of comparative constructions of the Allative subtype. This type is described as rare in many typologies and linked to verb-initial word order. The relative high occurrences of the Allative type found in several verb-final Tibeto-Burman languages seem to suggest that the Allative subtype is not constrained by any specific word order frame.

Several aspects that surfaced in the data discussion call for an updated approach in the typology of comparative constructions. These aspects include the high internal

diversity attested within the linguistic subgroups, the blurred boundaries among the types (for example, the double interpretation of the marker *phəy* in Konyak), and the tentative assignment of several comparative constructions to the Particle type. A typology of comparative constructions based exclusively on the marking on the standard of comparison may suffice to outline broad characteristics of comparative constructions, but fails in describing the full linguistic diversity of these structures. As a result, different comparative structures are lumped together in broad types, such as the Particle type, or several subtypes proliferate with arbitrary definitory criteria.

A proposed typology, whose implementation is left for future research, supports a multivariate approach to comparative constructions. In this framework, each structural variable is considered: all the structures found in a comparative construction are captured, such as degree markers, parameters markers, word order, and so on. The premature labelling of the variables should be also avoided, to prevent potential ambiguities. No variable is discarded *a priori,* and the set of potential variables is defined during the data collection process. These variables should then be described in a granular and systematic way, to ensure a detailed overview of their diversity. The definition of the types can then be outlined in a latter phase, in order to capture the systematic similarity of the constructions that are assigned to a specific type and, at the same time, to facilitate the cross-linguistic viability of the types.

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Abbreviations*

1 = 1st person	CUST = customary aspect	NR = general nominalizer
2 = 2nd person	DAT = dative	NSUBJ = non-subject

* The abbreviations used in the Suansu examples found in Section 2 follows the Leipzig Glossing Rules. The examples from the other Tibeto-Burman languages described in this study are reported with the original glosses found in the respective sources, with some minor adjustments for normalization purposes.

3 = 3rd person
ABS = absolutive
ABL = ablative
ACC = accusative
ADV = adverb
AG = agentive
ATTR = attributive
CJ = conjunct
CLF = classifier
COM = comitative
COMP = comparative
COND = conditional
COP = copula
DECL = declarative
DET = determiner
EQ = equative copula
ERG = ergative
GEN = genitive
GOAL = goal
INS = instrumental
IPFV = imperfective
LOC = locative
M = masculine gender
NOM = nominative
NAGT = non-agentive
NONFUT = non-future tense
NZP = nominalizing prefix
NZR = nominalizer
PL = plural
PN = personal name
POSS = possessive
PRS = present
PST = past
PL = plural
REL = relativizing subject
SG = singular
STAT = stative
SUB = subject
TOP = topic

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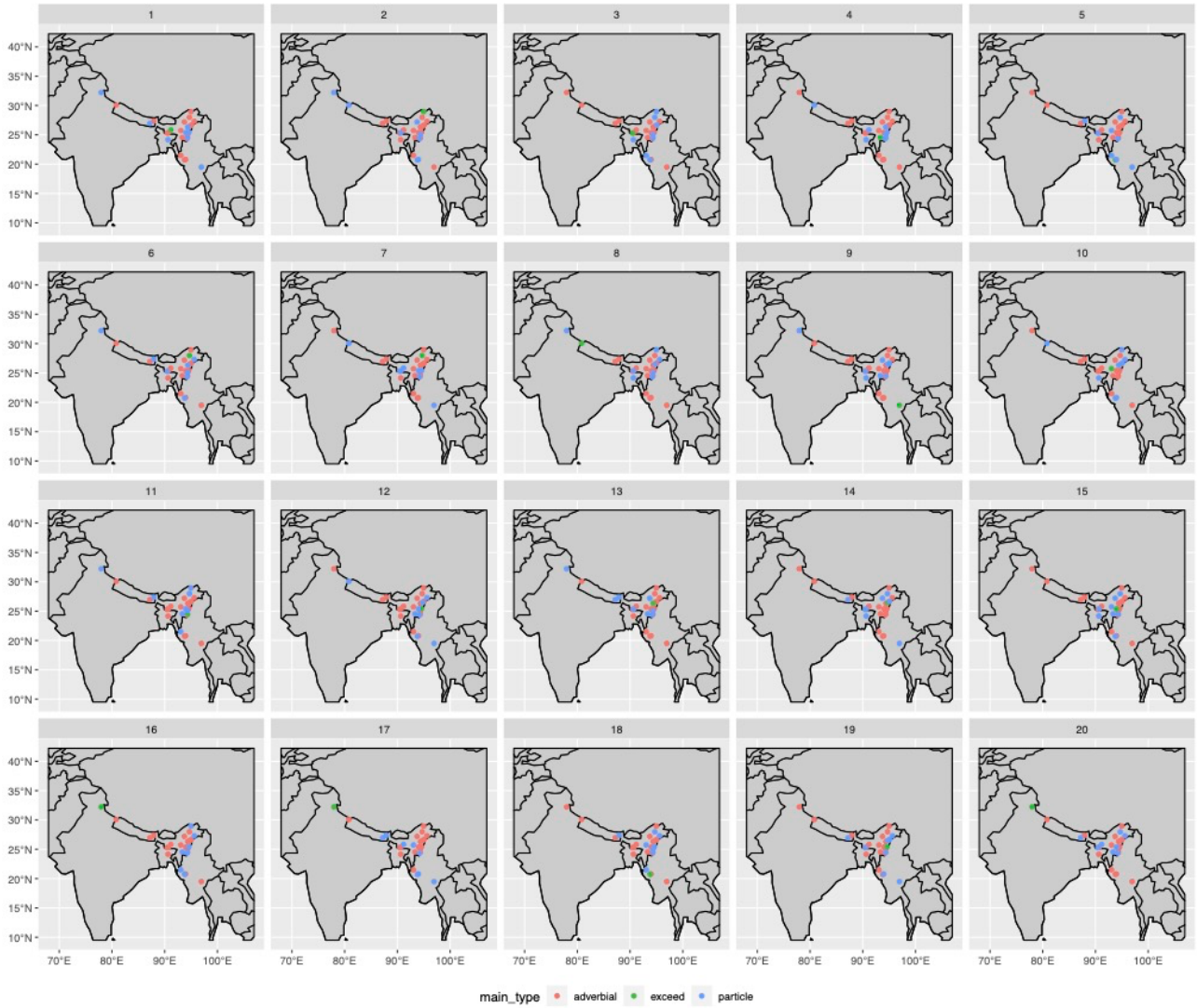
Appendix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