Comparatives, more so than most constructions, manage to hide their true logical nature under the cover of reduced clauses and covert operators. Almost any semantic analysis of the comparative must eventually invoke some amount of logical structure that lacks any surface correspondence. How can the identities of these “hidden” logical constituents be discerned? Clues to their precise nature can be found in their interactions with those constituents that are overtly expressed. These interactions can then be correlated with those found in other grammatical contexts, where the relationship between logical structure and surface structure is more plainly revealed.

It is thus not surprising that much recent work has focused on certain unexpected interpretations for modals and individual quantifiers when these appear inside the comparative clause:

(1)  a. Chris brought more presents than he had to.
     b. Chris brought more presents than he was supposed to.

(2)  a. I have to finish this abstract by today.
     b. I am supposed to finish this abstract by today.

In (1), the universal modals have (to) and supposed (to) give rise to distinct interpretations when embedded in the comparative clause: whereas (1a) conveys that Chris could have brought less presents, (1b) instead conveys that Chris should have brought less presents. This is surprising, since in unembedded contexts such as (2), the two modals appear virtually synonymous.

(3)  a. Chris is smarter than everyone else is.
     b. Chris is smarter than anyone else is.

(4)  a. I don’t think that everyone else is smarter than Chris.
     b. I don’t think that anyone else is smarter than Chris.

In (3), the universal quantifier everyone else and the existential (NPI) quantifier anyone else yield equivalent interpretations when embedded in the comparative clause: both (3a) and (3b) convey that Chris is taller than the tallest other person. This is again surprising, since in other contexts, e.g. (4), a clear interpretive difference between the two arises.

The main goal of my talk is to develop a novel treatment for the comparative, one that is a natural outgrowth of the traditional analysis in terms of maximality. Unlike the traditional analysis, the new treatment accounts for the interpretations triggered by different modals and individual quantifiers in terms of independently observable constraints on the scope of these items. The final picture that emerges also provides an opportunity to reconsider the long-held intuition that the logical form of comparison somehow incorporates a negation.