

'Idiomatic usage' of comparison markers

Is 'idiomatic usage' of comparison markers a good way to eliminate options in questions that test comparisons?

My answer: not so much. The problem with focusing on idiomatic usage to analyze options is that our understanding of 'typically' correct idioms interferes with our understanding of the meaning that the option conveys. You need to be particularly careful about understanding the intended logic of the sentence when it makes a comparison.

Let's look at this official question to illustrate this point. I'd especially like to focus on why we can't argue that the correct answer is not 'really' correct because it doesn't use the "more X than Y" construction.

Officials at the United States Mint believe that the Sacagawea dollar coin will be used more as a substitute for four quarters rather than for the dollar bill because its weight, only 8.1 grams, is far less than four quarters, which weigh 5.67 grams each.

- A) more as a substitute for four quarters rather than for the dollar bill because its weight, only 8.1 grams, is far less than
- B) more as a substitute for four quarters than the dollar bill because it weighs only 8.1 grams, far lighter than
- C) as a substitute for four quarters more than for the dollar bill because it weighs only 8.1 grams, far less than
- D) as a substitute for four quarters more than the dollar bill because its weight of only 8.1 grams is far lighter than it is for
- E) as a substitute more for four quarters rather than for the dollar bill because its weight, only 8.1 grams, is far less than it is for

Here's how I would go about understanding this question. The original sentence contains a comparison that is expressed using the comparison marker 'more than'. Okay, so my focus needs to be on whether the comparison makes logical sense in the original sentence. If it does, I know I need a correct answer that doesn't change the intended logic. But if it doesn't make sense in the original sentence, then I need to infer the correct logic from the original sentence, and then look for an answer that also uses the correct intended meaning.

So far so good. Let's do the meaning analysis.

Meaning Analysis

Since we're looking at the use of 'more than', I'm going to focus only on the comparison in this meaning analysis.

Officials at the United States Mint believe that the Sacagawea dollar coin will be used more as a substitute for four quarters rather than for the dollar bill because its weight, only 8.1 grams, is far less than four quarters, which weigh 5.67 grams each.

So the original sentence has two comparisons:

1. the Sacagawea dollar coin will be used more as a substitute for four quarters rather than for the dollar bill => Comparison between 'four quarters' and 'the dollar bill'
2. its weight... is far less than four quarters => Comparison between 'its weight' and 'four quarters'

While the first comparison is logically correct, the second clearly isn't. 'Weight' can't be compared to 'quarters'. The weight of something can logically be compared only with the weight of something else.

Error Analysis

Comparison errors in this sentence:

1. the Sacagawea dollar coin will be used more as a substitute for four quarters rather than for the dollar bill => 'More' can't be followed by 'rather than'. 'More' indicates a comparison while 'rather than' is used to show contrast. Note that in the case of option A, it is perfectly fine to eliminate the option based on the usage of 'more than' compared to the usage of 'rather than'. This is because the two phrases are used for different purposes. We already know from our meaning analysis that this sentence is making a comparison, not a contrast. So 'rather than' is out.
2. its weight... is far less than four quarters => Illogical comparison between 'its weight' and 'four quarters'.

Process of Elimination:

As I've done above, I'm going to focus on the comparison issue to eliminate choices.

Option A: INCORRECT as discussed.

Option B: INCORRECT.

1. **Comparison Error:** 'More as a substitute for four quarters than the dollar bill' => This comparison is ambiguous. It could mean one of two things:

- i) The dollar coin will be used more as a substitute for four quarters than the dollar bill **WILL**. => Comparison between the dollar coin and the dollar bill.
- ii) The dollar coin will be used more as a substitute for four quarters than **FOR** the dollar bill. => Comparison between four quarters and the dollar bill.

So you can see, there's no justification for applying the 'more X than Y' logic here. In fact, I would say it's a misconception that this use is 'idiomatic'. Saying so implies that this structure is always correct, whereas really, it's correct only when it conveys the intended logic correctly.

Option C: CORRECT

This choice says that the dollar coin will be used as a substitute for four quarters more than FOR the dollar bill. So, it clearly resolves the ambiguity present in option B.

Option D: INCORRECT

1. **Comparison Error**: 'For' is missing, leading to ambiguity.

Option E: INCORRECT

1. **Comparison Error**: 'More' is followed by 'rather than'.

So, as you can see, going by idiomatic usage is unlikely to be the best way to solve a comparison question. Focusing on the logic behind the comparison is the way to go.

I hope these observations help. 😊

Meghna