

## Identification and change: Patterns in English comparative degree formation

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In English, there are two major ways of comparative degree formation expressing superiority: (i) morphological (or synthetic) comparatives marked by the suffix *-er* attached to the adjectival stem (e.g. *longer*, also suppletive forms e.g. *better*), and (ii) syntactic (or analytical) forms (e.g. *more intricate*). Since the latter option does not involve the inflection of the adjectival stem, the question arises how the two patterns can be treated as belonging to the same variable.

The two patterns do not represent complete optionality as they are not interchangeable for most adjectives: their variation is phonologically and morphologically constrained. However, they are not in complementary distribution either: some adjectives allow both configurations (e.g. *easier / more easy*), and non-standard varieties may allow the combination of the two, resulting in double comparatives (e.g. *more longer*). This intricate synchronic relation is also reflected by the diachronic development, during which the synthetic pattern was not superseded by the analytical one (Kytö & Romaine 1997, González-Díaz 2006).

I propose that the variable should be extended to inferiority comparatives (e.g. *less big*), which are invariably analytic. Analytic superiority comparatives thus naturally fit into the larger morphosyntactic paradigm based on the features [ $\pm$ degree], [ $\pm$ comparative] and [ $\pm$ inferiority]; synthetic comparatives represent the unmarked value for inferiority, which is not expressed overtly.

### References

- González-Díaz, Victorina. 2006a. On the nature and distribution of English double periphrastic comparison. *The Review of English Studies* 57(232).
- Kytö, Merja & Suzanne Romaine. 1997. Competing forms of adjective comparison in Modern English: What could be *more quicker* and *easier* and *more effective*? In Terttu Nevalainen & Leena Kahlas-Tarkka (eds.), *To explain the present: Studies in the changing English language in honour of Matti Rissanen*. Helsinki: Sociétéé Néophilologique.