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Morphological complexity and contact effects in the history of English comparative degree formation

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. *smaller*), and (ii) syntactic (or analytical) forms (e.g. *more difficult*). The emergence of (ii) is a later development, yet it does not conform to the general “synthetic → analytic” change (Kytö & Romaine 1997) and it is not a borrowing from Romance either (González-Díaz 2006). Still, given that the analytic pattern is morphologically less complex, one might expect it to be more widespread in varieties with higher contact. My talk argues against such a simplification scenario. First, the diachronic development altogether resulted in a more complex system involving not only the variation between (i) and (ii) but also their combination, producing double comparatives (e.g. *more smaller*). Second, while contrastive data from World Englishes such as high-contact L1 Singlish (Lim & Ansaldo 2020) and indigenised L2 Malaysian English (Pillai & Greig 2020) show that regularised patterns are altogether more typical with large proportions of L2 speakers, the resulting regularised patterns frequently involve double comparatives, which retain morphological complexity and only involve a reinterpretation of the *-er* suffix in losing the [+superiority] feature.

References

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