

## Markedness and typological correlations in comparative degree formation

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In English, there are two major ways of comparative degree formation expressing superiority: morphological (synthetic) comparatives marked by the suffix *-er* attached to the adjectival stem, (1a), and syntactic (analytic) forms, (1b). In both cases, the standard of comparison is expressed by a *than*-clause, which is dependent on the degree marker in the matrix clause: leaving out the degree marker leads to ungrammaticality, (2). The pattern in (1) is a typical European strategy. Stassen (1985: 326–327) observes that particle comparatives (e.g. using the particle *than*) are an areal phenomenon which occurs rarely outside of Europe, constituting a later diachronic development that replaced other standard marking strategies (such as the dative in Old High German, see Jäger 2018). Further, Haspelmath (2001) considers degree markers to be typical for Standard Average European (SAE) languages (see Stolz 2013: 33–34 for discussion).

Unlike the correlation between the particle strategy and the presence of degree markers, the relation between morphological and syntactic degree marking is not straightforward. The apparent equivalence suggests that the two have the same underlying template (i.e. the degree suffix corresponds to a distinct node in syntax, see e.g. Bacskai-Atkari 2018). Importantly, the alternation between (1a) and (1b) is largely governed by phonological and morphological factors and it arises only with superiority comparatives: with inferiority comparatives, (3), degree formation is always analytic. Moreover, the existence of double marking, (4), as attested in non-standard and earlier English (Kytö & Romaine 1997, González-Díaz 2006, Wood 2012) suggests that the two markers are not in complementary distribution. In fact, the patterns suggest that the suffix is specified for [+degree] but not for [±inferiority], the latter being associated with the non-bound marker (Corver 2005, Wood 2012). In this sense, patterns like (1a) are underspecified: the superiority interpretation arises by default, constituting the unmarked value. In languages that consistently apply the degree suffix in superiority and the non-bound marker in inferiority comparatives (e.g. German), this markedness relation leads to a systematic asymmetry in the paradigm. Similar asymmetries may arise with non-bound markers as well, as in Romanian (Cornilescu & Giurgea 2013), see (5), indicating that bound markers may also undergo a grammaticalisation process leading to the bleaching of the [±inferiority] feature.

This raises the question whether typological correlations support the markedness relations set up for languages like English. In order to get a first approximation based on a large number of languages, I combined two variables from Grambank (Skirgård et al. 2023a; 2023b), namely GB275 and GB276, examining whether there is a bound or an unbound degree marker (respectively) on the property word. The distribution in the sample is as follows (considering only data points with known +/- values):

	+ BOUND	– BOUND
+ NON-BOUND	49	356
– NON-BOUND	208	650

The data in the sample confirm that degree markers are altogether not the most frequent option and that they are characteristic of the European area. If degree markers are attested, then they are more likely to be non-bound: this is expected as the suffix constitutes a more grammaticalised option. The co-presence of both markers in the system seems to be a minority pattern. In this respect, however, it has to be pointed out that the database has two problems: (i) languages with a degree suffix did not consistently receive a positive value for the non-bound degree marker (as is the case for English in the database, unlike for Dutch); (ii) only superiority comparatives were included (excluding thus non-bound degree markers occurring in inferiority comparatives in e.g. Lithuanian), which masks the paradigmatic dependency of bound degree markers. Amending (i) and complementing (ii), I suggest that the tendency for bound degree suffixes to occur in languages that also have non-bound degree suffixes is stronger, resulting in an implicational hierarchy in European languages, which also corroborates the unified syntactic template for morphological comparatives.

- (1) a. This novel is **shorter** [than the previous one was].  
b. This novel is **more exciting** [than the previous one was].
- (2) a. \*This novel is **short** [than the previous one was].  
b. \*This novel is **exciting** [than the previous one was].
- (3) a. less short  
b. less exciting
- (4) a. more shorter  
b. less shorter
- (5) a. mai interesant  
more interesting  
'more interesting'
- b. mai puțin interesant  
more less interesting  
'less interesting'

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