

Identification and change: Patterns in English comparative degree formation

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47th Annual Conference of the German Linguistics Society
Mainz, 5–7 March 2025

1 Introduction

linguistic variables in morphology/syntax – e.g. different case forms of a pronoun:

- (1) a. **She** may have seen **them**.
- b. **They** may have seen **her**.

conditioning straightforward based on function

similar: positive versus comparative adjectival forms:

- (2) a. Mary is very **tall**/***taller** for a schoolgirl.
- b. Mary is **taller**/***tall** than Jamie.

two major ways of comparative degree formation expressing superiority in English:

- morphological (synthetic) comparatives marked by the suffix *-er*
- syntactic (analytical) forms

examples:

- (3) a. long – longer
- b. intricate – more intricate

suppletive forms morphological:

- (4) a. good – better
- b. bad – worse

analytic comparatives do not involve the inflection of the adjectival stem

→ question: how the two patterns can be treated as belonging to the same variable

proposal: variable needs to be extended to inferiority comparatives

2 The synchronic pattern

two prototypes for synchronic variation:

- determined by grammar
- sociolinguistic variables

grammar – indefinite article (standard):

- (5) a. a pen
b. an apple

sociolinguistic variable – *ain't* for negation:

- (6) a. He **isn't** tired.
b. He **ain't** tired.

comparative degree formation: complex distribution

- no complete optionality
- no complementary distribution

distribution mostly phonologically and morphologically conditioned – primary factor: number of syllables (Quirk et al. 1985, Leech & Culpeper 1997, Kytö & Romaine 1997, Hilpert 2008)

- (7) a. long – longer / *more long
b. intricate – more intricate / *intricater

also some exceptions (see Mondorf 2003, Hilpert 2008):

- (8) a. apt – apter / more apt
b. trustworthy – trustworthier / more trustworthy

morphological factors and stress also play a role:

- (9) a. helpful – more helpful / *helpfuler
b. severe – more severe / *severer

but: many disyllabic adjectives show variation:

- (10) a. easy – easier / more easy
b. lively – livelier / more lively

syntactic factors (e.g. presence of *than*-complement, predicative versus attributive position) also play a role in the choice (Leech & Culpeper 1997, Lindquist 1998, Mondorf 2003, Hilpert 2008), as well as frequency (Quirk et al. 1985, Hilpert 2008)

double marking in non-standard varieties (Corver 2005, Wood 2012):

- (11) a. more longer
b. more hotter

forms in the same contexts where morphological comparatives would occur (Corver 2005)

- (12) a. Every time you ask me not to hum, I'll hum **more louder**.
b. How can I grow **more taller** through exercises.

→ no complementary distribution syntactically either (apart from paradigmatic variation) – variables apparently co-occurring

3 Diachronic development

two prototypes for diachronic development of variables:

- alternation: $A \rightarrow A/B \rightarrow B$
- doubling: $A \rightarrow A+B \rightarrow B$

alternation pattern: change of *-th* to *-s* for 3Sg in Early Modern English spreading from the North (Raumolin-Brunberg 2017)

London:

- beginning of 16th century: only *-th*
- interim period: both *-th* and *-s*
- end of 17th century: only *-s*

alternation:

- (13) a. The French King **geueth** no sattisfaction to oe ambassadors
(Nathaniel Bacon II, 1626; Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 198)
- b. My sister **giues** you thankes for seending him to her
(Brilliana Harley, 1625; Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 198)

doubling pattern: Jespersen cycle e.g. in Middle English (Wallage 2008)

- Stage I (till 1300): *ne*
- Stage II: *ne ... not*
- Stage III (from 1350): *not*

examples:

- (14) a. we **ne** moten halden Moses e lichamliche
we NEG need observe Moses law bodily
'we need not observe Moses' law bodily'
(CMLAMBX1,89.735; Wallage 2008: 644)
- b. ac of hem **ne** speke ic **noht**
but of them NEG spoke I not
'but I did not speak of them'
(CMTRINIT,95.1271; Wallage 2008: 644)
- c. Thou sall **not** do so
you ought not do so
'you ought not do so'
(CMROLLTR,43.880; Wallage 2008: 644)

original Germanic pattern in degree formation: morphological comparatives

change to periphrastic forms from Middle English onwards – question: whether the change is due to French/Latin influence

counter-arguments:

- periphrastic forms attested prior to Middle English as well – more plausible that periphrastic comparatives grammaticalised from adverbial intensifiers (González-Díaz 2006b)
- change not an instantiation of a general “synthetic” → “analytic” change in English either – synthetic comparatives not only continue to exist but are actually more frequent (Kytö & Romaine 1997)
- mixed system not the same as the Romance system

system in French (except for suppletive forms):

- (15) a. *plus grand* ‘taller’
b. *plus intelligent* ‘more intelligent’

double comparatives emerged at the same time as periphrastic comparatives – later highly stigmatised, disappearance from norm-oriented language (Kytö & Romaine 1997, González-Díaz 2006a)

→ double comparatives do not constitute a middle stage

periphrastic forms in Dutch: regularly with some adjectives (predicate-only, participial)
– Corver (1997: 294):

- (16) Jouw commentaar is me **meer waard** dan dat van Karel.
your commentary is me more worth than that of Karel
'Your commentary is more worth for me than that of Karel.'

variation with some adjectives as well (Corver 1997: 294):

- (17) Jan is veel **meer vatbaar** / **vatbaarder** voor de griep dan
Jan is much more susceptible susceptible.CMPR for the influenza than
Karel.
Karel
'Jane is much more susceptible to influenza than Karel.'

also doubling (Middle Dutch, non-standard Dutch):

- (18) a. Geven is **meer saliger** dan te ontvangen
give.INF is more blissful.CMPR than to receive.INF
'It is more blissful to give than to receive.'
(Corver 2005: 167, citing Stoett 1923: 93)
- b. een **meer soberder** huishouding
a more sober.CMPR housekeeping
'a more sober housekeeping'
(Corver 2005: 167, citing de Vooy's 1967: 69)

sporadic examples in German as well:

- (19) Nicht selten sind unsere eigenen "Baustellen" für unsere Besucher sehr
not rarely be.3PL our.PL own construction.sites for our visitors very
viel **mehr interessanter** als unsere anderen, fertiggestellten und
much more interesting.CMPR as our.PL other completed and
möblierten Zimmer.
furnished rooms
'Our constructions sites are not rarely much more interesting for our visitors than
our other, completed and furnished rooms.'

→ periphrastic and doubling patterns arise not only in "syncretic → analytic" or contact settings

4 Inferiority comparatives

question: relation of *-er* and *more*

comparatives expressing inferiority always analytic:

- (20) a. long – less long
b. intricate – less intricate

same in German and in Dutch:

- (21) a. *weniger teuer* 'less expensive'
b. *minder duur* 'less expensive'

→ analytic forms part of the larger system anyway

doubling also possible (non-standard):

- (22) Looks like Android Developers are **less happier** when compared to iPhone Developers
(Wood 2012)

similarly in Dutch (non-standard):

- (23) Bij de **minder duurdere** trompetten heb je dat ook.
with the less expensive.COMPR trumpets have you that too
'You also find that with the less expensive trumpets.'
(Corver 2005: 168)

sporadic examples in German as well:

- (24) Sprich, die Story ist **weniger interessanter** als die von Türkisch für Anfänger - der Film.
say the.F story is less interesting as the.F of Turkish for beginners - the.M film
'That is, the story is less interesting than that of *Turkish for Beginners - The Film*.'

→ doubling and *-er* not specific to superiority comparatives

5 Markedness and projections

linguistic variable cannot be captured morphologically only

- (25) a. easier
b. more easy
c. more easier

factors rooted in grammar but also sociolinguistic in nature

comparative forms more marked than absolute forms: [+comparative] feature (markedness associated with + values, see Wunderlich & Fabri 1995, Wunderlich 1996)

degree markers *more* and *less* in analytic patterns: composite of *much/little* (specifying superiority/inferiority) and the regular degree morpheme *-er* (Bresnan 1973)

default comparative morpheme on its own only in superiority comparatives

→ markedness: superiority comparatives constitute the unmarked case

feature [\pm inferiority] has two values: [-inferiority] > [+inferiority]

→ superiority interpretation in synthetic comparatives: arises by default (cf. [-comparative] in absolute adjectives)

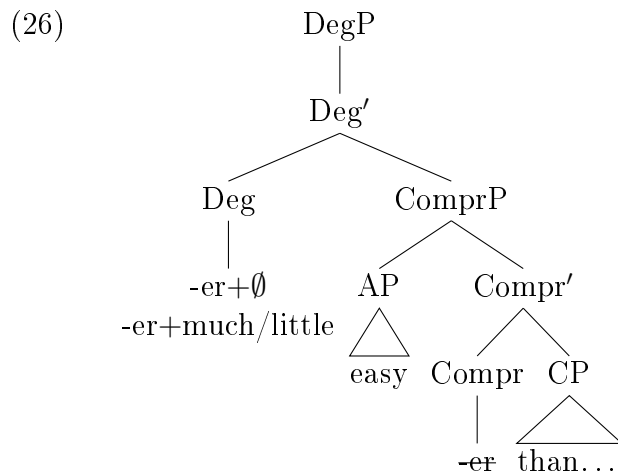
the *-er* morpheme encodes only [+comparative], but it is not specified for superiority (cf. Corver 2005, Wood 2012) – it could not occur in inferiority comparatives otherwise

proposal: unified template for the above patterns

two components represented in the syntax: [+comparative] and [±inferiority]

→ two functional projections (Bacskai-Atkari 2018; 2019; 2023)

structure of synthetic vs. analytic comparatives:



syntactic structure reflects semantic components

morphological component of the grammar responsible for creating the correct forms (including suppletive forms, Umlaut etc.) – late insertion approach (Distributed Morphology, see Halle & Marantz 1993): comparative form arises post-syntactically (fusion), syntax contains only abstract representations

double comparatives represent a mixture of synthetic and analytic comparatives – possible because the template is unified

interplay of markedness, economy and explicit marking of feature values

→ variables arise on the syntax–morphology interface

6 Conclusion

synthetic and analytic degree formation in English comparatives

- no complementary distribution or complete optionality
- co-occurrence shows different relevant syntactic positions
- system contains inferiority comparatives as well – analytic marking always there

→ linguistic variables arise on the syntax-morphology interface – markedness and unified syntactic template play a role

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