

Markedness and the system of comparative degree formation in English and German

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1 Introduction

two ways of comparative adjective formation in English: **syncretic** (morphological) and **analytic** (periphrastic):

- (1) a. tall – taller
b. intelligent – more intelligent

choice between the two: mostly phonological factors

↔ German:

- (2) a. *groß* ‘tall’ – *größer* ‘taller’
b. *intelligent* ‘intelligent’ – *intelligenter* ‘more intelligent’

same patterns in the superlative degree as well

additional morphological factors such as suppletion, Umlaut in syncretic patterns

question: how the morphosyntactic patterns are represented in the relevant systems

proposal:

- unified syntactic template (cf. Bacskai-Atkari 2018)
- morphological constraints language-specific
- markedness operates in a uniform fashion

→ variation between syncretic and analytic paradigms is due to markedness and morphological constraints

2 The systems

two aspects:

- morphological form: synthetic vs. analytic
- semantics: comparison of superiority vs. comparison of inferiority

System I: German (and Germanic in general, except for Modern English)

- (3) a. *größer* ‘taller’, *intelligenter* ‘more intelligent’
b. *weniger groß* ‘less tall’, *weniger intelligent* ‘less intelligent’

available patterns:

| | Synthetic | Analytic |
|-------------|--------------|------------------|
| superiority | A- <i>er</i> | – |
| inferiority | – | <i>weniger</i> A |

degree marker *weniger* in analytic patterns: composite of *wenig* ‘little’ and the regular degree morpheme *-er*

System II: English (Modern Standard English)

- (4) a. taller
b. more intelligent
c. less tall, less intelligent

available patterns:

| | Synthetic | Analytic |
|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| superiority | A- <i>er</i> | <i>more</i> A |
| inferiority | – | <i>less</i> A |

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

common properties:

- analytic patterns involve the default comparative morpheme *-er* in addition to a component specifying superiority/inferiority
- default comparative morpheme on its own only in superiority comparatives

→ markedness: superiority comparatives constitute the unmarked case

feature [\pm higher degree] has two values: [$+$ higher degree] > [$-$ higher degree]

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

evidence for *-er* not being tied to superiority:

- part of the superiority/inferiority marker in System I and System II
- occurs in addition to the superiority/inferiority marker in System III

System III: non-standard English

- (5)
- a. more taller
 - b. more intelligent
 - c. less taller
 - d. less intelligent

available patterns:

| | Synthetic + analytic | Analytic |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| superiority | <i>more A-er</i> | <i>more A</i> |
| inferiority | <i>less A-er</i> | <i>less A</i> |

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

markedness in System III plays no significant role – overt marking instead of default value

diachrony in English: change from System I to System II (standard)

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

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)
- System II not the same as the Romance system

System IV: French, generally Romance (except for Romanian)

- (6)
- a. *plus grand* ‘taller’, *plus intelligent* ‘more intelligent’
 - b. *moins grand* ‘less tall’, *moins intelligent* ‘less intelligent’

available patterns:

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| | Analytic |
| superiority | <i>plus A</i> |
| inferiority | <i>moins A</i> |

synthetic-like patterns expressing superiority only with suppletive forms, e.g. *meilleur* ‘better’ (absolute form *bon* ‘good’) – but: no comparative suffix can be isolated

synthetic forms essential in Systems I–III ↔ System IV

Romanian similar to general System IV in this respect (cf. Cornilescu & Giurgea 2013):

- (7) a. *mai interesant* ‘more interesting’
b. *mai puțin interesant* ‘less interesting’

similarity to System I and System II: [+higher degree] realised as the unmarked value (*mai* expresses only [+comparative])

difference between System I and System II/System III: syntactic marking of the unmarked value

3 The template

proposal: unified template for the above systems

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

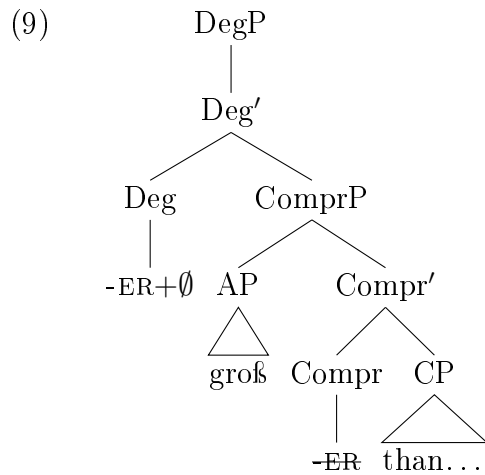
→ two functional projections (Bacskai-Atkari 2018; 2019)

comparison also possible without degree (cf. Jäger 2018, Hohaus & Zimmermann to appear):

- (8) a. I would **rather** die than go to the cinema with them again.
b. Maria ist **so** wie ihre Mutter.
Mary is so as her mother
‘Mary is like her mother.’

degree interpretation of the relevant markers: if there is an AP argument – functional heads taking the AP and the comparative standard as arguments (Lechner 2004)

structure of synthetic comparatives:

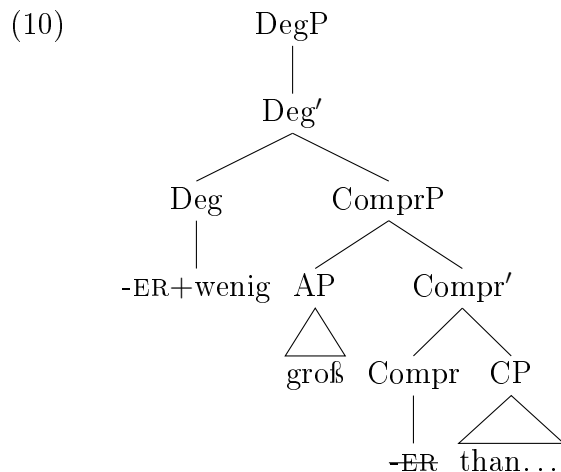


syntactic structure reflects semantic components

morphological component of the grammar responsible for creating the correct forms (including suppletive forms, Umlaut etc.)

- early insertion approach (Minimalist Morphology, see Wunderlich & Fabri 1995): comparative AP inserted, licensed only if a zero Compr head is present
- late insertion approach (Distributed Morphology, see Halle & Marantz 1993): comparative form arises post-syntactically (fusion), syntax contains only abstract representations

structure of analytic comparatives:



morphological component of the grammar responsible for creating the correct forms (including suppletive forms, Umlaut etc.)

- early insertion approach: complex degree element inserted, upward movement to check a degree feature
- late insertion approach: fusions of the heads Deg and Compr

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

4 Conclusion

comparative adjective formation in English and German – two (or three) different systems

- morphology imposes constraints on the applicability of comparative suffixes
- unified syntactic template
- comparative suffix in itself marks only [+comparative] but not [±higher degree] – interpretation as [+higher degree] arises as this is the unmarked value

markedness plays a crucial role in Germanic systems: unmarked value paired up with the morphologically least marked pattern

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