

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

Julia Bacskai-Atkari

University of Konstanz

julia.bacskai-atkari@uni-konstanz.de

21. Norddeutsches Linguistisches Kolloquium
Oldenburg, 25–26 March 2021

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

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	<i>A-er</i>	–
inferiority	–	<i>weniger A</i>

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	<i>A-er</i>	<i>more A</i>
inferiority	–	<i>less A</i>

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

Romanian

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

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)

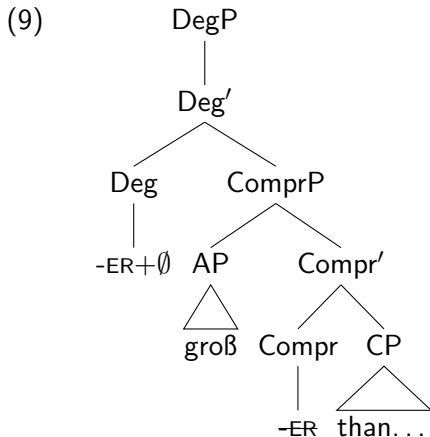
Comparison and degree

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



Morphology

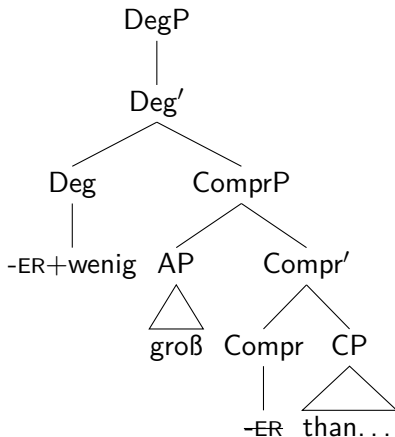
syntactic structure reflects semantic components

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

(10)



Morphology

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

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

Thank you!

Danke!

References I

- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2018. *Deletion phenomena in comparative constructions: English comparatives in a cross-linguistic perspective*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2019. Towards a Fanselowian analysis of degree expressions. In Jessica M. M. Brown, Andreas Schmidt & Marta Wierzba (eds.), *Of trees and birds: A Festschrift for Gisbert Fanselow*, 95–106. Potsdam: Universitätsverlag Potsdam.
- Bresnan, Joan. 1973. The syntax of the comparative clause construction in English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 4(3). 275–343.

References II

- Cornilescu, Alexandra & Ion Giurgea. 2013. The adjective. In Carmen Dobrovie-Sorin & Ion Giurgea (eds.), *A reference grammar of Romanian: Volume 1: The noun phrase*, 355–530. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Corver, Norbert. 2005. Double comparatives and the comparative criterion. *Recherches linguistiques de Vincennes* 34. 165–190.
- González-Díaz, Victorina. 2006a. On the nature and distribution of English double periphrastic comparison. *The Review of English Studies* 57(232). 623–664.
- González-Díaz, Victorina. 2006b. The origin of English periphrastic comparatives. *English Studies* 87(6). 707–739.

References III

- Halle, Morris & Alec Marantz. 1993. Distributed morphology. In Ken Hale & Samuel Jay Keyser (eds.), *The view from Building 20: Essays in linguistics in honor of Sylvain Bromberger*, 111–176. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hohaus, Vera & Malte Zimmermann. to appear. Comparisons of equality with German *so...wie*, and the relationship between degrees and properties. *Journal of Semantics* .
- Jäger, Agnes. 2018. *Vergleichskonstruktionen im Deutschen: Diachroner Wandel und synchrone Variation*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

References IV

- 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*, 329–352. Helsinki: Sociétéé Néophilologique.
- Lechner, Winfried. 2004. *Ellipsis in comparatives*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wood, Jim. 2012. Double comparatives. Yale Grammatical Diversity Project: English in North America. Available online at <http://ygdp.yale.edu/phenomenadouble-comparatives>. (9 March, 2020).

References V

Wunderlich, Dieter & Ray Fabri. 1995. Minimalist Morphology: An approach to inflection. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 14(2). 236–294.