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

Julia Bacskai-Atkari
University of Amsterdam / University of Potsdam
j.bacskaiatkari@uva.nl / julia.bacskai-atkari.1@uni-potsdam.de

26th conference of the International Association for World Englishes
Gießen, 25–27 July 2025

1 Introduction

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

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

examples:

(1) a. long – longer
b. intricate – more intricate

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

(2) a. more longer
b. more hotter

→ question: how the relation of the patterns can be modelled

- analytic pattern morphologically simpler
- potential role of language contact in diachronic development
- potential effect of language contact in World Englishes

proposal: morphological simplification as a scenario not plausible

→ alternation between patterns is governed by markedness – effects of the paradigm

2 Synchronic distribution

distribution mostly phonologically and morphologically conditioned, but also influenced by syntax and frequency – primary factor: number of syllables (Quirk et al. 1985, Leech & Culpeper 1997, Kytö & Romaine 1997, Hilpert 2008, Lindquist 1998, Mondorf 2003)

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

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

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

morphological factors and stress also play a role:

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

but: many disyllabic adjectives show variation:

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

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

comparatives expressing inferiority always analytic:

(7) a. long – less long
b. intricate – less intricate

→ analytic forms part of the larger system anyway

doubling (non-standard): forms in the same contexts where morphological comparatives would occur (Corver 2005)

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

doubling also possible with inferiority comparatives:

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

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

3 Diachronic development

original Germanic pattern for superiority: 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):

(10) 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 – also no clear "syncretic → analytic" change

4 Language contact and morphological complexity

further contact effects with the spread of English – this time: complex system (involving alternation) as the input

general expectation (Dahl 2004; 2017, Trudgill 2011; 2017, Mithun 2015, Berdicevskis & Semenuks 2022, Atkinson et al. 2018, Raviv et al. 2019, Walkden et al. 2023):

- language contact may or may not reduce morphological complexity
- reduction effect expected (especially) with a larger number of untutored L2 speakers
- threshold: ca. 50% adult learners in the population (Trudgill 2011; 2017)

expectation for comparatives specifically:

- analytic comparatives more dominant than synthetic comparatives
- doubling pattern also morphologically complex and should be avoided

→ loss of suffix independently of the paradigm

5 Variation in South and Southeast Asia

double comparatives and superlatives overall a frequently attested morphosyntactic feature worldwide (Kortmann & Szmrecsanyi 2004: 1154)

example from Hong Kong English:

(11) or other er more... um **more better** facilities
(09- HE:00:40, Setter et al. 2010: 48)

doubling does not imply iconic use (i.e. 'much more')

overview of the feature double comparatives in South and Southeast Asia in eWAVE (Kortmann et al. 2020):

Variety	**Type**	**Value**
Colloquial Singapore English (Singlish)	High-contact L1	attested
Philippine English	High-contact L1	extremely rare
Hong Kong English	Indigenized L2	pervasive/obligatory
Malaysian English	Indigenized L2	pervasive/obligatory
Indian English	Indigenized L2	attested
Sri Lankan English	Indigenized L2	attested
Pakistani English	Indigenized L2	absent
Butler English	English-based pidgin	pervasive/obligatory

→ clear correlation with contact in the distribution

corpus study:

- ICE Singapore (Nelson 2002) and ICE Hong Kong (Nelson 2006)
- ICE Singapore: 1,550,248 tokens; ICE Hong Kong: 2,249,659 tokens; both corpora contain 500 files
- search for clusters with *more/less* and *most/least* (size of cluster: 2, search term position on the left) in AntConc (Anthony 2025)
- manual search in the extracted data for *more* + A-*er* etc.
- corpus search for *more* + A-*er* – exclusion of irrelevant hits
- additional search for *more* + A and A-*er* for the selected adjectives

results for Singapore:

- altogether 8 relevant examples for doubling with *more*
- no examples for doubling with *less* or with superlatives

results for superiority comparatives in Singapore (spoken/written):

Adjective	**Doubling**	**Synthetic**	**Analytic**
good	2 (1 s / 1 w)	576 (257 s / 219 w)	0
quiet	2 (0 s / 2 w)	1 (1 s / 0 w)	0
clear	1 (1 s / 0 w)	12 (6 s / 6 w)	0
light	1 (1 s / 0 w)	7 (3 s / 4 w)	0
smart	1 (1 s / 0 w)	1 (1 s / 0 w)	0
sweet	1 (1 s / 0 w)	1 (0 s / 1 w)	0
TOTAL	**8** (1.32%)	**598** (98.68%)	0
Spoken	5 (1.83%)	268 (98.17%)	0
Written	3 (1.39%)	230 (98.71%)	0

examples:

(12) a. Go for a 3-D course is much **more better** to get a diploma right (ICE-Singapore;S1A-088)

b. She sings **better** in Cantonese.
(ICE-Singapore; S1A-007)

results for Hong Kong:

- altogether 22 relevant examples for doubling – mostly with *more*
- examples for doubling with *less* and also with superlatives

results for superiority comparatives in Hong Kong (spoken/written):

Adjective	**Doubling**	**Synthetic**	**Analytic**
good	3 (3 s / 0 w)	685 (499 s / 186 w)	0
easy	5 (5 s / 0 w)	89 (62 s / 27 w)	2 (2 s / 0 w)
close	2 (2 s / 0 w)	57 (35 s / 22 w)	2 (2 s / 0 w)
fast	2 (2 s / 0 w)	47 (27 s / 20 w)	1 (1 s / 0 w)
cheap	1 (1 s / 0 w)	56 (43 s / 13 w)	1 (1 s / 0 w)
deep	1 (1 s / 0 w)	21 (10 s / 11 w)	0
great	1 (1 s / 0 w)	92 (27 s / 65 w)	0
long	1 (1 s / 0 w)	192 (105 s / 87 w)	0
low	1 (1 s / 0 w)	205 (109 s / 96 w)	0
simple	1 (1 s / 0 w)	15 (10 s / 5 w)	3 (3 s / 0 w)
TOTAL	**18** (1.21%)	**1459** (98.18%)	**9** (0.61%)
Spoken	18 (1.89%)	927 (97.17%)	9 (0.94%)
Written	0	532	0

examples:

(13) a. it makes for foreigners it makes it even far uh **more easier**.
(ICE-HongKong; S1A-011)

b. uh are writing in improper English or English that is **easier** for Hong Kong people to understand.
(ICE-HongKong; S1A-024)

c. and that's why it's easy for or usually **more easy** to start with imaging system of looking at
(ICE-HongKong; S2A-050)

results for inferiority comparatives in Hong Kong (spoken/written):

Adjective	**Doubling**	**Synthetic**	**Analytic**
proud	1 (1 s / 0 w)	0	0

example:

(14) Similar **less prouder** than them.
(ICE-HongKong; S1A-056)

results for superiority superlatives in Hong Kong (spoken/written):

Adjective	**Doubling**	**Synthetic**	**Analytic**
busy	1 (1 s / 0 w)	7 (6 s / 1 w)	0
bad	1 (0 s / 1 w)	53 (41 s / 12 w)	0
TOTAL	**2** (3.23%)	**60** (96.77%)	0
Spoken	1 (2.08%)	47 (97.92%)	0
Written	1 (7.14%)	13 (92.86%)	0

examples:

(15) a. However, the **most worst** is that sexual harassment which refers to the
(ICE-HongKong; W1A-008)

b. No, it's the **worst** airline in the world.
(ICE-HongKong; S1A-007)

results for inferiority superlatives in Hong Kong (spoken/written):

Adjective	**Doubling**	**Synthetic**	**Analytic**
low	1 (1 s / 0 w)	28 (15 s / 13 w)	0

examples:

(16) a. they could include song but just I mean of the **least lowest** priority
(ICE-HongKong; S1A-016)

b. and the **lowest** level I taught was primary three
(ICE-HongKong; S1A-084)

no significant differences between *more* + A-*er* vs. A-*er* between Singaporean English and Hong Kong English:

- overall: X^2 (1, N = 2083) = 0.035876, P=0.8498
- in the spoken data: X^2 (1, N = 1218) = 0.0061359, P=0.9376

→ actual distribution of double comparatives does not fully reflect the expectations based on typological status

also: no overall dominance of analytic structures (see Gu 2017 for superlatives in Singaporean English)

possible reasons: variation, orientation to more conservative standards, feature not a dialect marker

6 Markedness and features

proposal: unified template for the above patterns (see Bacskai-Atkari 2018; 2019; 2023 for the syntax)

two features: [+comparative] and [±inferiority]

Superiority/inferiority [±inferiority]	**Comparative [+comparative]**	**Result (example)**
	-er	*easier*
much/little	-er	*more/less easy*
more/less	-er	*more/less easier*

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

second feature: [±inferiority] – two values: [–inferiority] > [+inferiority]

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

→ superiority interpretation in synthetic comparatives: arises by default (cf. [–comparative] in absolutive 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

double comparatives represent a mixture of synthetic and analytic comparatives – symmetric system not relying on default value

→ status of comparative degree formation in South and Southeast Asian Englishes: using a simplification of the paradigm, not the inflection per se

7 Conclusion

degree formation in English comparatives – focus on South and Southeast Asian Englishes

- double comparatives represent a globally well-attested feature
- high-contact varieties: degree of contact apparently correlates with the pervasiveness of double comparatives
- distribution in corpora does not fully reflect the expected differences
- double comparatives involve a more unified paradigm (but no inflectional simplification, unlike analytic comparatives)

→ contact effects can contribute to paradigmatic simplicity with or without inflectional simplification

References

Anthony, Laurence. 2025. *AntConc*. Waseda University Tokyo, Japan. `http://www.laurenceanthony.net`.

Atkinson, Mark, Kenny Smith & Simon Kirby. 2018. Adult learning and language simplification. *Cognitive Science* 42(8). 2818–2854.

Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2018. *Deletion phenomena in comparative constructions: English comparatives in a cross-linguistic perspective*. Berlin: Language Science Press. doi:10.5281/zenodo.2545509.

Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2019. Towards a Fanselownian 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.

Bacskai-Atkari, Julia. 2023. *The syntax of functional left peripheries: Clause typing in West Germanic and beyond*. Berlin: Language Science Press.

Berdicevskis, Aleksandrs & Arturs Semenuks. 2022. Imperfect language learning reduces morphological overspecification: Experimental evidence. *PLOS ONE* 17(1). 1–26.

Bresnan, Joan. 1973. The syntax of the comparative clause construction in English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 4(3). 275–343.

Corver, Norbert. 2005. Double comparatives and the comparative criterion. *Recherches linguistiques de Vincennes* 34. 165–190.

Dahl, Östen. 2004. *The growth and maintenance of linguistic complexity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Dahl, Östen. 2017. Polysynthesis and complexity. In Michael Fortescue, Marianne Mithun Mithun & Nicholas Evans (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of polysynthesis*, 19–29. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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.

Gu, Qianping. 2017. A corpus-based comparative study on the superlative forms in British English and Singapore Colloquial English. *WORD* 63(4). 241–257.

Hilpert, Martin. 2008. The English comparative – language structure and language use. *English Language and Linguistics* 12(3). 395–417.

Kortmann, Bernd, Kerstin Lunkenheimer & Katharina Ehret. 2020. eWAVE: The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English. `https://ewave-atlas.org/`.

Kortmann, Bernd & Benedikt Szmrecsanyi. 2004. Global synopsis: morphological and syntactic variation in English. In Bernd Kortmann, Kate Burridge, Rajend Mesthrie, Schneider Edgar W. & Clive Upton (eds.), *A handbook of varieties of English 2: Morphology and syntax*, 1142–1202. Berlin: De Gruyter.

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: Sociéteé Néophilologique de Helsinki.

Leech, Geoffrey N. & Jonathan Culpeper. 1997. The comparison of adjectives in recent British English. In Terttu Nevalainen & Lena Kahlas-Tarkka (eds.), *To explain the present: Studies in the changing English language in honour of Matti Rissanen*, 353–374. Helsinki: Sociéteé Néophilologique de Helsinki.

Lindquist, Hans. 1998. The comparison of English disyllabic adjectives in *-y* and *-ly* in Present-day British and American English. In Hans Lindquist, Staffan Klintborg, Magnus Levin & Maria Estling (eds.), *The major varieties of English: Papers from MAVEN 97, Växjö 20–22 November 1997*, 205–212. Växjö: Växjö University.

Mithun, Marianne. 2015. Morphological complexity and language contact in languages indigenous to North America. *Linguistic Discovery* 13(2). 37–59.

Mondorf, Britta. 2003. Support for *more*-support. In Günter Rohdenburg & Britta Mondorf (eds.), *Determinants of grammatical variation in English*, 251–304. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Nelson, Gerald. 2002. International Corpus of English: The Singapore Corpus user manual. `https://www.ice-corpora.uzh.ch`.

Nelson, Gerald. 2006. International Corpus of English: The Hong Kong Corpus user manual. `https://www.ice-corpora.uzh.ch`.

Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech & Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.

Raviv, Limor, Antje Meyer & Shiri Lev-Ari. 2019. Larger communities create more systematic languages. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 286. 1–9.

Setter, Jane, Cathy S. P. Wong & Brian H. S. Chan. 2010. *Hong Kong English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Trudgill, Peter. 2011. *Sociolinguistic typology: Social determinants of linguistic structure and complexity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trudgill, Peter. 2017. The anthropological setting of polysynthesis. In Michael Fortescue, Marianne Mithun Mithun & Nicholas Evans (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of polysynthesis*, 186–202. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Walkden, George, Gemma Hunter McCarley, Raquel Montero, Molly Rolf, Sarah Einhaus & Henri Kauhanen. 2023. Sociolinguistc typology meets historical corpus linguistics. *Transactions of hte Philological Society* 121(3). 546–567.

Wood, Jim. 2012. Double comparatives. Yale Grammatical Diversity Project: English in North America. Available online at http://ygdp.yale.edu/phenomena/double-comparatives. (9 March, 2020).

Wunderlich, Dieter. 1996. Minimalist Morphology: The role of paradigms. In Geert Booij & Jaap van Marle (eds.), *Yearbook of morphology 1995*, 93–114. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Wunderlich, Dieter & Ray Fabri. 1995. Minimalist Morphology: An approach to inflection. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 14(2). 236–294. doi:10.1515/zfsw.1995.14.2.236.