LINGUISTICS

COMPARATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This paper commences by examining the conditions for use of -er or more (or either) as the form of the index of comparison in English, followed by discussion of the forms for comparison of adverbs, and of the superlative index with both adjectives and adverbs. The syntax of a prototypical comparative construction (two participants compared in terms of one property, as in John is happier than Mary) is compared with that of a non-prototypical construction (two properties compared for one participant, as in John is more intelligent than sensible). Finally, there is brief consideration of inherently comparative expressions, and of the verb compare.

1. Introduction

The prototypical comparative scheme, which is found in most (but not all) human languages, involves comparing two participants in terms of the degree of some gradable property relating to them. There are three basic elements: the two participants being compared, and the property in terms of which they are compared. Consider the sentence:

1) John is more famous than Bill.

COMPAREE INDEX PARAMETER MARK STANDARD

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1 I have benefitted from the most helpful comments on a draft of this paper from Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald, Kate Burridge, Andrew Butcher, Stig Johansson and Jerry Sadock. And from the participants in the Workshop on Comparative Constructions at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology in June 2004.
The participants are:

**COMPAREE** — that which is being compared, here *John.*
**STANDARD** of comparison — what the comparee is being compared against, here *Bill.*

The property is:

**PARAMETER** of comparison — here *famous.*

A prototypical comparative scheme will generally also include:

**INDEX** of comparison — here *more* (with a different choice of adjective it could be *-er*).

Within any clause, there must be some marking of the function of each argument. In English the Comparee is subject (shown by its position before the verb), with the Standard of comparison receiving special marking. We get:

**MARK** of the grammatical function of the Standard — *than.*

This paper deals with comparative constructions in my dialect of educated British English. It begins, in §2, with consideration of the form of the index of comparison, and the conditions for using *more or *-er* or either. There is then discussion of comparison of adverbs, and of the superlative index with both adjectives and adverbs. The syntax of comparatives is the topic of §3. Two brief sections then mention inherently comparative expressions, and the verb *compare.* (Note that I basically follow the transcriptional system of Jones (1956), who documents a dialect of educated British English very similar to my own).

2. Form of the Index of comparison

We can exemplify positive and negative instance of the prototypical comparative scheme in English by:

2a) John is fatter than Tom.
2b) John is less fat than Tom.
2c) John is more intelligent than Tom.
2d) John is less intelligent than Tom.

These are copula clauses with the Parameter of comparison being an adjective, in copula complement function. The positive Index of comparison is either a suffix *-er* /-or/, or a modifier *more, /mɔ:ʳ/ or /mɔː/. There are corresponding superlative Indexes *-est, /-ɔːst/ or /-iːst/, and most, /mɔːst/. The negative index of comparison has a single form, comparative *less, /lɛs/, and superlative *least /liːst/*.

The origin of the periphrastic Indexes *more, most, less and least* is interesting. In Old English, the adjectives *micel ‘big’* and *lýtel ‘little’* had the following paradigm:

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<tr>
<td>big</td>
<td><em>micel</em></td>
<td><em>mɪːr</em></td>
<td><em>mɪːst</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little</td>
<td><em>lɪtel</em></td>
<td><em>lɪːssa</em></td>
<td><em>lɪːst</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The form *micel* dropped out of use (being replaced by *big*), but its comparative and superlative were retained as general periphrastic Indexes for adjectives which do not take *-er* or *-est* (and for some that do). The comparative and superlative of *little* took the same path, becoming dissociated from the adjective *little.* For the comparative of *little* one just had to use *smaller* and *smallest.* Only recently have new comparative and superlative forms, *lɪttlɪr* and *lɪttlɪst*, started to come into use.

Besides being used for qualitative comparison, *more and less* also have a quantitative sense, as in *Three times three is more than six plus two,* *There are more people in Sydney than in Melbourne,* and *He drinks less beer than he used to.*

English still retains irregular paradigms for three adjectives:

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<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td><em>better</em></td>
<td><em>best</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad</td>
<td><em>worse</em></td>
<td><em>worst</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>far</td>
<td><em>farther/further</em></td>
<td><em>farthest/furthest</em></td>
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</table>

Regular comparative and superlative forms *older* and *oldest* have now replaced the original irregular forms *elder* and *eldest.* The latter are retained in frozen lexical items such as *the elders of the church/the tribe* and *elder brother/sister.* In a prototypical comparative construction, only *older* (and *oldest*) may be used.

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2 There is a perceptive discussion of comparatives in Jespersen's (1933: 219-29) chapter on "Degree". A wide array of example sentences are in Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1099-1170) and De Clerck (1991: 342-5).
The Indexes can be modified. For example:

3) a bit
   a little bit
   much
   very much

   plus fatter/more intelligent/less fat/less intelligent

An Index of comparison may also be preceded by an adverb such as even, simply, really, or kind-of.

When used in a prototypical comparative construction such as (1-2), with two participants and one property, some adjectives only take -er (for example, big, kind), some only take more (intelligent, beautiful), while others may take either (friendly, stupid) as the Index of comparison. When two properties are compared with respect to one participant, in a non-prototypical comparative construction, we get:

4) Mary is more kind than intelligent.

One cannot say *Mary is kinder than intelligent. That is, when the first adjective in a construction like (4) is one which would normally take -er (or an irregular comparative), it must in this context take more. This is discussed further in §3.

(Note that whereas the prototypical comparative construction is found in many languages, a non-prototypical construction such as (4) occurs in far fewer languages.)

Whether a given adjective may take -er or more in a prototypical comparative construction is almost predictable. It depends on a combination of factors:

- the phonological form of the adjective,
- its frequency of usage in the language,
- whether or not it refers to a property which is, in a logical sense, gradable.

The most basic parameter is phonological form, as set out in Table 1, shown on pages 20 and 21. During and after commentary on the table, I will refer to the other two factors. Note that parentheses around /a/ or in Table 1 indicate that this is a less preferred possibility.

The orthographic form -er has the following phonological forms:

i) /-go/ after a monosyllable ending in /ŋ/; for example, long, /lɒŋ/, longer, /lɒŋɡər/.

ii) /-a/ elsewhere, that is: after a consonant other than /ŋ/, as in wide, /waɪd/, wider, /waɪdər/; after a vowel other than /a/, as in grey, /ɡreɪ/, greyer, /ɡreɪər/; true, /truː/, truer, /truːər/; pretty, /ˈprɪti/, prettier, /ˈprɪtiər/.

A set of adjectives have orthographic form ending in <er> or <rer> with the last vowel being /ə/. In some dialects, particularly in Scotland and the USA, a final /r/ is generally pronounced. However, in standard English and Australian varieties, the /r/ is only pronounced before a suffix, clitic or following word (within the same intonation group) which begins with a vowel. We thus get /ˈrɛl/, as realisation of comparative -er after /ɑ/; for example, dear /ˈdiər/, dearer /ˈdiərər/, tender /ˈtendər/, tenderer /ˈtendərər/, obscure /ˈʌbskər/, obscure /ˈʌbˈskərər/.

All allomorphs of -er take a linking /r/ before a word commencing with a vowel within the same grammatical constituent, so long as a pause does not intervene; for example, smaller /ˈsmɔːlər/.

We can now comment on the sets in Table 1 (leaving aside for the time being some adjectives, such as right and real, which would be expected to take -er but do not, on semantic grounds).

SET A. Monosyllabic forms, ending in a consonant or a vowel.

These take -er and, as a rule, use this form exclusively (rather than more) in the prototypical comparative construction. (Some speakers do nowadays use more, as an alternative to -er, with monosyllables ending in /a/, such as fair and clear.)

Two exceptions are well (no speaker accepts *weller) and ill (some speakers accept iller, many do not). These are the only common monosyllabic adjectives ending in a high or mid vowel plus /l/ (cruel, which takes -er, is generally /krʊəl/); this may constitute a phonological factor which accounts, in part, for these exceptions. Another factor may be that well was originally an adverb, being later extended to adjective function.

SET B. Disyllabic monomorphemic forms, ending in a vowel or syllabic /l/.

All take -er. A disyllabic form is preserved for all save those ending in /a/, which, with the “linking r”, add /-rə/ for example, clever /ˈklevər/, cleverer /ˈklevərər/.

Some adjectives in set B may use more as an alternative to -er. This applies most to those ending in /əʊ/ or in plain /ə/ where, for example, either of secure and more secure and either of cleverer and more clever is acceptable. More may be used with forms which end in /ou/, or in syllabic /l/, but the -er form is generally preferred; for example, hollower rather than more hollow, gentler rather

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3 Bauer (1994: 51-61) presents a study of how the use of more and -er may have changed over the past century (without arriving at any firm conclusions).
than more gentle. For a less frequent item, such as mellow or subtle, the more alternative may be preferred. Forms ending in /i/ are pretty well restricted to -er; one seldom hears more heavy.

Although most disyllabic adjectives ending in plain /ə/ take -er (clever, bitter, tender), silver and eager do not. Silver is relatively uncommon as an adjective and scarcely used in a comparative construction (one says more silvery rather than more silver); in addition, the -il may be a factor (recall that well does not take -er and ill scarcely does). Eager is a common word, often used in comparatives, but only with more. *Eagerer is quite unacceptable, and it is hard to explain why this should be (the long vowel may be a factor, but this is very much speculation).

Disyllabic forms ending in syllabic /i/ generally take -er; for example, simple /ˈsɪmpl/, simpler /ˈsɪmplə/. Those which end in /ə/ (loyal, royal, formal) count as disyllabic consonant-final and are confined to more. Evil may have the form /ˈɪvəl/ or /ˈɪvəl/; it does not take -er, suggesting that /ˈɪvəl/ calls the tune. Idle /aɪdl/ satisfies the criterion for -er, with a final syllabic /ə/; the fact that it is confined to more may be due to interference from the noun idler (derived from verb idle).

There are a few disyllabic adjectives ending in syllabic /n/, such as rotten and sudden. Unlike those ending in syllabic /ə/, most of these are pretty well confined to more; rotter is rather marginal and *suddener quite unacceptable. (There is time adverb often, with no corresponding adjective, which allows both often and more often.)

SET C. Disyllabic forms ending in a vowel, which include suffix -y or -ly.

These are the only vowel-final suffixes that derive disyllabic adjectives, for example, friendly, cloudy. These items are like monomorphic disyllabic forms ending in /i/ (such as happy) in taking -er. They differ from those in that they may also occur with more. Thus, more friendly and more cloudy as alternatives to friendlier and cloudier.

SET D. Adjectives not included in sets A-C.

Generally, these do not take -er. For example, disyllabic forms ending in a consonant, such as famous, superb, public, foreign, direct, and golden; trisyllabic or longer terms ending in a consonant, such as elastic, careful, difficult, splendid and experimental; and trisyllabic or longer forms ending in a vowel, such as ordinary, familiar, peculiar, extraordinary and necessary.

There are a number of exceptions here, disyllabic or longer forms ending in a consonant (none ending in a vowel) which would be expected from their phonological form not to take -er but in fact do so, as an alternative to more. The main exceptions are: stupid, solid, wicked, pleasant, polite, common, handsome.

There are a number of factors which may go some way towards explaining these exceptions. Firstly, there appears to be a preference for antonyms to behave in the same way. One can say cleverer, ruder and hollower (sets A and B) and so also stupider, politer and solderer. Another factor is that these are very common, everyday adjectives. A full explanation (in the sense of something which could have been predicted) is not possible. These are exceptions, although not totally surprising exceptions.

It will be seen that five of the exceptions end in /d/ or /v/. When one tries out -er on other adjectives from set D, which are normally confined to more, different results are obtained depending on the final segment. Forms ending in a labial or velar stop or /s/ cannot possibly take -er. *Superber, *Elasticer and *Famouser sound totally unacceptable. However, frequently-used adjectives ending in an alveolar stop are not quite as bad. One could imagine the scope of -er being extended so that rapider, honester, completer and profounder (which are currently quite unacceptable) should come into circulation. That is, the final alveolar stop in stupid, solid, wicked, pleasant and polite may be one of several factors enabling these adjectives to take -er.

SET E. Adjectives with prefix un-.

Generally, if an adjective takes -er then it is likely still to do so after the addition of negative prefix un-. However, more is always an alternative, and often the preferred alternative.

For sets A and B, more is seldom used with kind, fair and happy, but it is with unkind, unfair and unhappy. A form such as more unfair will often be preferred over unfairer. The negated form of friendly, from list C, has comparatives more unfriendly and unfriendlier, and here more unfriendly will often be preferred. Some of the exceptions in set D do have un- antonyms. One can say uncommoner, although more uncommon is generally preferred. And more unpleasant, more impolite are generally used rather than the odd-sounding unpleasanter and impoliter.

Frequency has a role here. Noble (from set B) is not a very common lexeme; one can say nobler or more noble. The negative adjective ignoble is a rather obscure item; if this were to be used in a comparative construction, more ignoble would have to be used (rather than *ignobler). Another factor is length; adding un- lengthens the stem and, as a rule, the longer a form, the less likely it is to accept -er.

We can now look at semantic reasons for the exclusion of certain adjectives from those that take -er. This relates to their gradability. The adjectives mentioned in Table 1, and in the discussion above, are fully gradable. But others are not. We can recognise three classes.
Class (a)

Cannot be graded; do not occur with more or -er. These include: first, last, second, opposite.

Class (b)

Adjectives which, by their meaning, should not really be gradable; however, speakers do use them in comparative constructions. Even though for some of them the phonological form relates to set A or set B, they only occur with more, never -er:

This class includes (phonological set in parentheses):

right (A)  wrong (A)
real (A)  fake (A)
dead (A)  alive (D)
male (A)  female (D)
ready (B)
single (B)

And also the following from set D: correct, equal, extreme, perfect, proper and unique.

Basically, something should either be right or not, real or not, dead or not, male or not, single or not, and so on. On logical grounds, one should not compare two items in terms of such a property. But people do. The interesting fact is that while most of these adjectives have a phonological form which should accept -er, only more may be employed. If neither Mary nor Jane are married, then both are single. However, one can say Mary (who lives alone) is more single than Jane (who shares an apartment with her boyfriend). Or John was more right than Peter, if John got every detail correct but Peter only the outline. Or He was more dead than I had realised (the body was starting to decompose).

Class (c)

It involves true and false, adjectives which also refer to properties that should not be gradable. They are monosyllables which should take -er, not more. True, at least, can be used with -er, but also with more, which is not normally available for monosyllables. False is only used with more.

For those adjectives which may take either -er or more, there are doubtless various factors which assist in determining which should be used. I have uncovered one of these. In (3) some of the modifiers to a comparative were listed. Those adjectives which may use more or -er can have a bit or a little bit or much with either of the possibilities. But not very much; this always selects the more comparative, if a choice is available. For example:

5) handsome, stupid, friendly in preference to very much, stupider, friendlier

Those adjectives which are generally confined to -er, do retain this with very much; for example, very much bigger/fatter/dearer/drier.

2.1. Comparative adverbs

The Parameter of comparison may be a manner adverb rather than an adjective, as in:

6) John spoke more quietly than Mary (spoke).

Here the Comparee is John spoke and the Standard of comparison Mary spoke, with the Parameter being quietly, the Index of comparison more, and the Mark of the standard than.

Most adjectives form an adverb by the addition of suffix -ly. The language does not allow adverbial suffix -ly and comparative suffix -er to co-occur. There are thus a number of relations between comparative adjective and comparative adverb. Table 2, shown on page 22, sets out the main possibilities, with (a-d) exemplifying large classes of forms and (e-h) providing a full list of exceptions. The rows in the table will be commented on in turn.

a) An adjective which forms its comparative with -er, and derives an adverb with -ly, adds more to the adverb for comparison.

b) An adjective which may use -er or more for the comparative, and derives an adverb with -ly, again adds more to the adverb for comparison.

c) Those adjectives which use more for comparative, and form an adverb with -ly, also use more for comparison of the adverb.

d) Adjectives derived with suffix -ly (from set C of Table 1) constitute a class of exceptions. They cannot take adverb-forming suffix -ly; it appears that two suffixes -ly, even though with different meanings, are not permitted. There is no adverb: *friendily corresponding to adjective friendly, for instance. One simply has to use a phrasal adverb: in a friendly way with, for the comparative, either in a friendlier way or in a more friendly way.

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4 I am here describing Standard English. Various dialectal variants can use a plain adjective in adverbial function, as in He talked rude/bad rather than He talked rudely/badly. I have not systematically investigated such dialects.
The two basic SPEED adjectives, quick and slow, have comparatives quicker and slower. They form adverbs in regular fashion by adding *-ly; just occasionally, the plain adjective can be used in adverbial function: walk quickly/slowly as an alternative to walk quickly/slowly. In keeping with this, the comparative adverb may be either quicker/slower or more quickly/slowly.  

The two main VALUE adjectives, good and bad, have irregular comparatives, better and worse. Good also has an irregular adverb, well, while bad shows the regular form badly. The comparative adjectives are also used as comparative adverbs, better (rather than *more well) and worse (rather than *more badly). For example, Mary sings better/worse than John.

A number of adjectives maintain the same form in adverbial function: fast, hard, early and late. (There are forms hardly and lately, with quite different meanings, but no forms *fastly or *early.) In accord with this, the comparative adjectives are also used as comparative adverbs.

Long behaves in an unusual manner. There is no adverb *longly; instead, either the adjective long or else lengthily (derived from the nominalisation length) are employed. For example, He talked long/lengthily on that topic. The comparative adverb can be based on either of these, as in He talked longer/more lengthily than Mary. (One could, alternatively, employ phrasal adverb at length and its comparative at greater length.)

There are some adverbs which are not derived from an adjective but which do form a comparative. These include time adverbs late and soon (both take -er) and often (which takes -er or more).

2.2. Form of the superlative index

Basically, every adjective which forms a comparative with -er has a corresponding superlative with -est. Those employing more for comparative use most for superlative.

Jespersen (1933: 227) states: "the superlative does not indicate a higher degree than the comparative, but really states the same degree, only looked at from a different point of view". Whereas a comparative adjective typically makes up the whole of a copula complement argument and relates together two participants of equal status, as in (1-2), a superlative effectively identifies a unique individual. The superlative form of an adjective typically modifies a noun in an NP which is marked by the definite article the. Compare:

7) John is better/more intelligent than each of the other boys in the class.

8) John is the best/most intelligent boy in the class.

Most has two quite different grammatical functions. It can be, as in (8), a general superlative like -est, and it can also be an intensifying modifier, with a meaning similar to very or really. Compare the intensifying use of most in (9) with the superlative use in (10):

9) He is most famous.
10) He is the most famous person (in town).

Famous is an adjective which forms its superlative with most. The difference between the two senses of most becomes morphologically apparent with an adjective which only takes -est, as in (12), or one which may take either -est or most, as in (14).

11) Your mother was most brave (throughout the ordeal).
12) Your mother was the bravest person (in town) (throughout the ordeal).
13) She was most friendly.
14) She was the friendliest/most friendly person (in town).

Sentence (12) involves a superlative, expressed by -est with brave. However, bravest could not be used in (11) since here most has an intensifying meaning. Similarly for (14) and (13).

A comparative can be used in a similar syntactic frame to a superlative, as in:

15) John is the cleverer of the twins.
16) John is the cleverest of the triplets.

In many cases, a comparative is employed when two participants are involved and a superlative for more than two. However, people do use a superlative for reference to a set of two; one hears John is the cleverest of the twins. And the idiom put your best foot forward can not be rephrased as *put your better foot forward.

2.3. Superlative adverbs

Superlative adverbs follow the same formal pattern as comparatives, set out in Table 2. One simply uses -est in place or -er (/ist/ or /ost/ replacing the /er/ of -er) and most in place of more. However, superlative adverbs are used much less than comparative adverbs. A typical syntactic position is following the core constituents of a clause, as in:

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5 This variation is beginning to extend to other forms; for example, some people may say John spoke ruder than Mary, as an alternative to John spoke more rudely than Mary.
17) He speaks French \{ (the) best (the) slowest (the) most fluently (the) most carefully \} of all the boys in the class.

It was remarked that a superlative adjective typically occurs in an NP with the. As can be seen in (17), a superlative adverb is typically preceded by the, although this can be omitted.

3. The syntax of comparative constructions

There are basically three Indexes of comparison in English, \textit{more} (\textit{than}), \textit{less} (\textit{than}), and \textit{as} (\textit{as}). Consider:

18) John is \textit{more} intelligent than Fred.
19) Fred is \textit{less} intelligent than John.
20) John is \textit{as} intelligent as Fred.

Sentences (18) and (19) have the same meaning – that John’s level of intelligence is greater than Fred’s. Sentence (20) states that the levels of intelligence are the same.\(^6\)

Under negation we get:

21) John is \textit{not more} intelligent than Fred.
22) Fred is \textit{not less} intelligent than John.
23) John is \textit{not as} intelligent as Fred.

Both (21) and (22) state that Fred’s level of intelligence is the same as or greater than John’s. And (23) states that John’s level of intelligence is below that of Fred. That is, negation of ‘(the same) as’ implies less, never more. Jespersen (1933: 224) points out that: “comparisons with \textit{less} are not very frequent; instead of \textit{less dangerous than}, we often say \textit{not so dangerous as}, and whenever there are two adjectives of opposite meaning we say, for instance, \textit{weaker than}, rather than \textit{less strong than}”.

\textit{More} (\textit{than}), \textit{less} (\textit{than}) and \textit{as} (\textit{as}) have a quantitative as well as a qualitative sense, the equality Index then becoming \textit{as many/much as}. The Indexes can link NPs within an NP. For example:

24) \{ More men than women \\
Less (or fewer) men than women \\
\textit{As many men as women} \}\ voted for the president.

25) \{ more whiskey than gin.
\textit{less whiskey than gin.} \textit{as much whiskey as gin.} \}

Last year, Japan imported \{ more whiskey than gin.
\textit{less whiskey than gin.} \textit{as much whiskey as gin.} \}

An alternative to \textit{as many as is as few as}. Then, \textit{As few men as women voted for the president} states that a small number of men, and about the same small number of women, cast their vote for him. Similarly, an alternative to \textit{as much as is as little as}. This provides a paradigm for quantity terms:

26)

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<th>PLAIN</th>
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<th>SUPERLATIVE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COUNTABLE</td>
<td>{ many }</td>
<td>{ more }</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MASS</td>
<td>{ much }</td>
<td>{ less }</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comparative and superlative of \textit{few} can be \textit{fewer} and \textit{fewest} (forms preferred by prescriptivists), as alternatives to \textit{less} and \textit{least}.

Quantitative comparison relates items in terms of their size. In contrast, qualitative comparison relates items in terms of some shared property or state or activity. The prototypical comparative construction is exemplified in (1-2) but the full possibilities are considerably wider. In essence, any two clauses can be compared, by \textit{more (than)}, \textit{less (than) or as (as)}, provided that:

i) each clause is of the same construction type;  
ii) the clauses describe comparable properties, states or actions.

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\(^6\) Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1101) state that (16) “is consistent with” John having a higher level of intelligence than Fred. This is erroneous. It would require something like John is \textit{at least as intelligent as} Fred.
The possibilities are illustrated in:

27)

- a. Mary dances more than a. John sings
- b. Mary speaks French more often than b. John speaks German
- c. Mary designs gardens better than c. John constructs gardens
- d. Mary writes stories more slowly than/ d. John paints pictures
- e. Mary likes jazz slower than e. John dislikes rock
- f. Insincerity annoys Mary v. more vigorously than f. Jealousy irks John

The Parameters and Indexes of comparison illustrated in (27) are:

i) quantity: *more than, less than, as much as*;

ii) time: *more often than, less often than, as often as*;

iii) VALUE: *better than, worse than, as well/badly as*;

iv) SPEED: *more slowly than or slower than, less slowly than or less slow than, as slowly as* (and similarly for quick, fast);

v) adverbs derived from other adjectives; for example, *more vigorously than, less vigorously than, as vigorously as*.

Note that not every comparative adverb can be appropriately marked with every pair of clauses. For example, (ii) and (v) are only marginally possible with (e-e) and (f-f), while (iv) is not possible at all.

In (27), clause pairs (a) are intransitive with different subjects and verbs; (b) are transitive with the same verb but different subjects and objects; (c) have the same object but different subjects and verbs; and clauses (d-f) differ in all constituents.

The paired clauses have the same structure and similar meanings; the actions or states which the clauses describe are comparable. A little mixing could be possible between the left-hand and right-hand columns in (27); for instance, it may be possible to contextualise Mary dances better than John speaks German. But other clause types are scarcely comparable. One could not expect to hear *Mary writes stories more than John dislikes rock, or *Mary likes jazz more than jealousy irks John. It will be seen that a comparative construction cannot include a verb from the semantic type LIKING in one clause and a verb from

the type ANNOYING in the other clause (for semantic types, see Dixon 1991, 2005).

If the two clauses share everything but the subject NP, then everything but the subject can be omitted from the second clause, as in:

28) Mary speaks French more fluently than John (speaks French).

Similarly, if the two clauses share everything but the object NP, then everything but the object can be omitted from the second clause, as in:

29) Mary speaks French more fluently than (Mary speaks) German.

It is possible to choose subject and object NPs such that ambiguity might result. For example:

30) John loves you more than Mary (loves you).
31) John loves you more than (John loves) Mary.

The syntactic function of a core NP in English is shown by its position relative to the verb. Once the verb is omitted, this criterion is lost so that in John loves you more than Mary it is hard to tell whether Mary is subject or object of the second clause. The ambiguity could be resolved by saying either John loves you more than Mary does or John loves you more than he does Mary.

The compared clauses in examples just discussed had just core (subject and object) arguments. There may, of course, also be peripheral arguments. And the two clauses in a comparative construction could be identical save for a peripheral argument. For example:

32) John tells stories to children more than (John tells stories) to adults.

The Index of comparison, *more, can remain between the two clauses, as in (32), or it can be moved to precede the peripheral argument in the first clause, giving John tells stories more to children than to adults. Similarly with time adverbs (in the morning more than in the afternoon, or more in the morning than in the afternoon) and space adverbs (in the garden more than in the house, or more in the garden than in the house).

The constructions just discussed have included intransitive and transitive clauses. We can now examine the comparison of copula clauses, which shows a rather different grammar. Consider the following underlying structures:

33) [John is sincere] more than [Fred is loyal]
34) [John is a fighter] more than [Fred is a tactician]
35) [John is the brains behind the enterprise] more than [Fred is the driving force]
Comparative constructions in English

In (33), involving two clauses each with an adjective as copula complement, the Index more cannot remain between the clauses, but must be moved to immediately precede the copula complement of the first clause. That is, in place of (33), which is unacceptable, we have:

33') John is more sincere than Fred is loyal.

When the copula complement is an NP, either indefinite as in (34) or definite as in (35), more may remain between the clauses, as in (34-35) or it may be moved to position before the copula complement of the first clause, as in:

34') John is more (of) a fighter than Fred is a tactician.
35') John is more the brains behind the enterprise than Fred is the driving force.

In (34') of may optionally intrude between more and the indefinite NP a fighter.

Less and as much behave exactly like more; for example, John is less sincere than Fred is loyal; and either John is a fighter as much as Fred is a tactician or John is as much (of) a fighter as Fred is a tactician. Note that more (than), less (than) and as much (as) are the only Indexes which may be involved in the comparison of copula clauses.

As with the comparison of transitive and intransitive clauses, repeated constituents may be omitted. For example:

36) John is more sincere than Fred (is sincere).
37) John is more sincere than (John is) loyal.

And similarly for clauses like (34-35) involving NPs as copula complement.

Sentence (36) is a prototypical comparative construction, where two participants are compared in terms of a property. In contrast, (37) is a non-prototypical comparative, where two properties are compared in relation to one participant. From the discussion just provided, it might be inferred that prototypical and non-prototypical constructions are of similar status, being reduced in similar ways from a biclausal construction such as (33).

The adjectives used for illustration thus far in this section form their comparative with more. When we examine the behaviour of adjectives which employ the suffix -er, a clear difference between prototypical and non-prototypical comparatives emerges. Let us employ rude as copula complement in the first clause of a comparative construction. Underlying:

38) [John is rude] more than [Mary is insensitive] is realised as:
38') John is ruder than Mary is insensitive.

That is, the Index of comparison, more, is moved into juxtaposition with the adjective rude, producing ruder; in (38'). If the two clauses have the identical copula complement, we get:

39) John is ruder than Mary.

This is the prototypical comparative construction.

The non-prototypical comparative construction comes about when the two clauses in (38) have the same subject, which can be omitted. We get (a sentence similar to (6) above):

40) John is more rude than insensitive.

In this non-prototypical comparative construction, more plus rude may NOT be replaced by ruder; that is, *John is ruder than insensitive is not an acceptable sentence.

There is thus an important grammatical difference in English between the kind of comparative construction which is termed prototypical, since it is found in the majority of languages, and the type termed non-prototypical, since it occurs in a minority of languages. In English, an adjective which takes comparative -er must assume this form within a prototypical comparative construction, where two participants are related in terms of one property, as in (39). But in a non-prototypical construction, such as (40), where two properties are related to one participant, an adjective which may otherwise take -er has here to occur with more.

There are many variants on the construction types presented here. Alongside:

41) Fred's wife is more beautiful than Peter's,

we can get:

42) Fred has a more beautiful wife than Peter.

Using an adjective which may take -er, prettier could be substituted for more beautiful in both (41) and (42). These are variants of the prototypical comparative, involving two participants and one property, and so require -er on an adjective of the appropriate kind.

4. Inherently comparative expressions

English has a number of terms which are inherently comparative, effectively fusing Parameter and Index into one form. These include:

(a) Adjectives superior (to) and inferior (to) are etymologically related to morphological comparatives in Latin. They have a similar meaning to more
than and less than, but both Comparee and Standard must be
nominalisations. For example, John’s intelligence is superior to Mary’s (intelli-
gence), alongside John is more intelligent than Mary.

(b) Transitive verbs such as exceed and surpass basically indicate a com-
parison of quantity, as in The number of men exceeds the number of women. Subject
and object can be nominalisations of adjectives; we can have either of:

43) Mary’s industriousness surpasses John’s.
44) Mary surpasses John in industriousness.

Constructions of this kind are more idiomatic in the passive, with the addition of
only, as in John’s ignorance is exceeded only by his stupidity.

Verbs such as outdo and outperform may occur in a construction like (44),
but not in one like (43).

(c) While verb like corresponds to adjective good (for example, I like jazz rel-
ates to (I think) jazz is good), verb prefer corresponds to comparative adjective
better (I prefer jazz to rock relates to (I think) jazz is better than rock).

Prefer is thus an inherently comparative verb. As grammatical support for
this, compare:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPARATIVE ADJECTIVE</th>
<th>PLAIN VERB</th>
<th>INHERENTLY COMPARATIVE VERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>better</td>
<td>like</td>
<td>prefer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>much better</td>
<td>*much like</td>
<td>much prefer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very much better</td>
<td>very much like</td>
<td>very much prefer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The inherently comparative verb prefer can be modified by much, like a com-
parative adjective, unlike the corresponding plain verb like.\(^9\)

(d) The grammatical combination would rather (which behaves quite differ-
ently from adverb rather) is also an inherent comparative, and marks the
Standard of comparison with than. Parallel to I prefer walking to running,
one can say I would rather walk than run.

(e) The grammatical combination even better serves to link sentences and has a
comparative sense. One person could suggest Why don’t we go to the cin-
ema. Another might respond: Even better, who don’t we go to the theatre. A
further degree of gradation is shown by use of better still. A third person
could then say: Better still, let’s go to the opera. The most extreme grade
involves best of all, as in Best of all, we could stay at home and watch a
video.

5. The verb compare

The verb compare has the person who makes the comparison as subject, with
the Comparee and Standard expressed through the object argument. This can be
a plural NP or it may involve coordination using and. For example:

45) The lecturer compared
    \{ the various Roman generals. \}
    \{ Caesar and Augustus. \}

The Parameter may be implicit (generals are presumably compared in terms of
generalship) or explicitly stated through a peripheral constituent, as in:

46) The travel agent compared Bali and Tahiti \{ as holiday destinations. \}
    \{ in terms of life-style. \}

An alternative construction is to have just the Comparee as O of compare, and
state the Standard through a following NP marked by with:

47) The travel agent compared Bali with Tahiti \{ as a holiday destination. \}
    \{ in terms of life-style. \}

Sentence (47) can involve promotion of object to subject slot in the presence of
an appropriate adverb or negation (similar to a sentence such as These cars sell
well), giving:

48) Bali \{ doesn’t compare \} with Tahiti \{ as a holiday destination. \}
    \{ compares favourably \} \{ in terms of life-style. \}

This shows that in (47) the O NP of compare is just Bali (rather than Bali with
Tahiti), since only Bali is promoted into subject position in (48). Note also that it
is appropriate to include as holiday destinations (plural) in (46) but as a holiday
destination (singular) in (47).

Promotion to subject is also possible from (46), giving Bali and Tahiti com-
pare favourably as holiday destinations. (The topic of “promotion to subject” is

\(^9\) These remarks apply to positive sentences. Interestingly, negatives are somewhat different, since
one can say I don’t much like it, corresponding to I very much like it (but scarcely *I don’t very much
like it, save in a particular contrastive context).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SET</th>
<th>FORM OF ADJECTIVE</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
<th>-er HAS BE FORM</th>
<th>CAN more BE USED?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Monosyllabic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in /y/</td>
<td>long, strong, young</td>
<td>/-y/</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in another consonant</td>
<td>big, wide, hard, kind, quiet, rude,</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>brave, calm, cheap, coarse, loose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in /a/</td>
<td>fair, clear, dear, square, sure, pure</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>((✓))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in another vowel</td>
<td>dry, free, new, raw, slow, grey</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Disyllabic, monomorphic, ending in vowel or syllabic /u/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in /i/</td>
<td>heavy, pretty, happy, busy, easy</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in /ou/</td>
<td>yellow, hollow, narrow</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>(✓)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in syllabic /u/</td>
<td>simple, humble, gentle, noble, subtle</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>(✓)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in plain /a/</td>
<td>clever, bitter, tender</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in /au/</td>
<td>demure, secure, obscure, mature</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Disyllabic, bimorphic, ending in vowel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in suffix -y, /-y/</td>
<td>cloudy, hungry, lazy, lucky, dreamy</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>end in suffix -ly, /-ly/</td>
<td>friendly, lonely, lively, lovely, manly</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>All others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disyllabic and longer, end in consonant</td>
<td>famous, superb, public, foreign,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>golden, careful, difficult, splendid</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exceptions</td>
<td>stupid, solid, wicked, pleasant,</td>
<td>/-al/</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>polite, common, handsome</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trisyllabic and longer, end in vowel</td>
<td>ordinary, familiar, peculiar,</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>extraordinary, necessary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Adjectives with prefix un- or im-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from set A</td>
<td>unkind, unfair</td>
<td>(/-a/)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from set B</td>
<td>unhappy</td>
<td>(/-a/)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from set C</td>
<td>unfriendly</td>
<td>(/-a/)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from set D</td>
<td>uncommon</td>
<td>(/-a/)</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>unpleasant, impolite</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADJECTIVES</th>
<th>COMPARATIVE</th>
<th>ADVERBS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) rude</td>
<td>ruler</td>
<td>rudely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy</td>
<td>happier</td>
<td>more rudely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) stupid</td>
<td>stupider or more stupid</td>
<td>more stupidly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) direct</td>
<td>more direct</td>
<td>more directly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) friendly</td>
<td>friendlier or more friendly</td>
<td>more friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) quick</td>
<td>quicker</td>
<td>quicker or more quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slow</td>
<td>slower</td>
<td>slower or more slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) good</td>
<td>better</td>
<td>better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fast</td>
<td>faster</td>
<td>faster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard</td>
<td>harder</td>
<td>harder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early</td>
<td>earlier</td>
<td>earlier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>later</td>
<td>later</td>
<td>later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) long</td>
<td>longer</td>
<td>longer or more lengthily</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


