Markedness and typological correlations in comparative degree formation

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1 Introduction

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

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

examples:

(1) a. This novel is **shorter** [than the previous one was].
 b. This novel is **more exciting** [than the previous one was].

standard of comparison is expressed as a *than*-clause in both cases – dependent on the degree marker in the matrix clause:

(2) a. *This novel is **short** [than the previous one was].
 b. *This novel is **exciting** [than the previous one was].

pattern in (1) a typical European strategy:

- Stassen (1985: 326–327): particle comparatives (e.g. using the *than*) an areal phenomenon – rare outside of Europe, later diachronic development replacing other standard marking strategies (e.g. the dative in Old High German, see Jäger 2018).
- Haspelmath (2001): degree markers typical for Standard Average European (SAE) languages (see Stolz 2013: 33–34 for discussion)

correlation between degree markers and the particle strategy mostly straightforward (*than*-clause a complement of the degree head)

↔ relation between morphological and syntactic marking not evident

proposal: markedness relations relevant for typological distribution – inferiority comparatives should also be included

2 Markedness

basic markedness distinction: whether comparative degree is present or not (Jäger 2018, Bacskai-Atkari 2023):

(3) [–degree] > [+degree]

markedness associated with + values (see Wunderlich & Fabri 1995, Wunderlich 1996)

morphosyntactic marking reflects (3):

(4) a. short – shorter
b. exciting – more exciting

relation between bound and unbound markers less straightforward

degree marking represents a separate syntactic node – unified template for both strategies (Bresnan 1973, Izvorski 1995, Corver 1997a, Lechner 1999; 2004, Bacskai-Atkari 2018)

additional markedness distinction: superiority versus inferiority

(5) [–inferiority] > [+inferiority]

inferiority comparatives: degree formation always analytic

(6) a. less short
b. less exciting

→ superiority interpretation in synthetic comparatives arises by default (cf. [–degree] in absolutive adjectives)

→ the -*er* morpheme encodes only [+degree], but it is not specified for superiority (cf. Corver 2005, Wood 2012)

further evidence from double comparatives (Corver 2005, Wood 2012; see Kytö & Romaine 1997 for the historical development in English):

(7) a. Every time you ask me not to hum, I'll hum **more louder**.
(Corver 2005)

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

→ bound and unbound markers not in complementary distribution

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

→ unbound markers may express both [+degree] and [±inferiority], bound markers express only [+degree]

3 European systems

decisive for systems: regular comparative formation (excluding suppletive forms)

symmetric systems – e.g. Italian:

(8) a. più grande
more tall
'taller'

b. meno grande
less tall
'less tall'

asymmetric systems – e.g. German:

(9) a. größer
taller
'taller'

b. weniger groß
less tall
'less tall'

mixed systems – e.g. English:

- both bound and unbound markers productively used in superiority comparatives
- choice governed by various factors, mostly phonological and morphological (see Quirk et al. 1985, Leech & Culpeper 1997, Kytö & Romaine 1997, Hilpert 2008, Lindquist 1998, Mondorf 2003 on English, Corver 1997b on Dutch)

underspecification regularly with bound markers, but potentially also with unbound markers, if the superiority interpretation has been bleached

Romanian (Cornilescu & Giurgea 2013):

(10) a. mai interesant
more interesting
'more interesting'

b. mai puţin interesant
more less interesting
'less interesting'

→ status of a superiority marker can best be understood by considering it in the larger system (involving inferiority)

systems of comparison (superiority and inferiority)

- only unbound markers (symmetric or, as in Romanian, asymmetric)

- unbound and bound markers (generally asymmetric, but symmetric doubling)

no system known with only bound markers (i.e. using a suffix for inferiority comparison)

→ expectation: bound markers on their own are a secondary pattern

4 Typological data

question: how typological correlations can be mapped onto markedness relations

typological overview: two variables from Grambank (Skirgård et al. 2023a, Skirgård et al. 2023b)

- GB275: Is there a bound comparative degree marker on the property word in a comparative construction?
- GB276: Is there a non-bound comparative degree marker modifying the property word in a comparative construction?

→ combination of the variables in the sample:

	[+BOUND]	**[–BOUND]**
[+NON-BOUND]	49	356
[–NON-BOUND]	208	650

significant correlation between the variables: X^2 (1, N = 1263) = 25.033, P<0.01

in practice: most languages (51.46%) in the sample do not have degree markers

but also: non-bound markers without bound markers slightly more likely to occur than the other way round

geographical distribution: European area dominant for degree markers

languages with two [+] values in the sample:

- 20 out of 49 languages (40.82%) from the Eurasian area
- out of these languages, 14 (70%) are from the Indo-European language family

→ dual pattern highly associated with Indo-European languages (very common in Germanic languages)

important: bound and unbound markers not in free variation (see e.g. English)

Breton (see Press 1986: 80):

- comparative suffix -*oc'h*

- analytic superiority comparatives with *muioc'h* 'more' (emphasis, past participles)
- analytic inferiority comparatives (competing with negated superiority forms)

examples:

(11) a. *tevoc'h* 'fatter'
b. *muioc'h karet* 'more beloved'
c. *nebeutoc'h karet* 'less beloved'

systems with non-bound markers only: no suffixation (very common in Romance languages)

Maltese (see Stolz 2011: 248):

- analytic superiority comparatives with *aktar/iktar* 'more'
- synthetic suppletive forms only for a limited set of adjectives

examples:

(12) a. *aktar intelliġenti* 'more intelligent'
b. *inqas intelliġenti* 'less intelligent'

systems with bound markers only: problematic category

- including English – but English also has productive analytic superiority comparatives
- non-bound markers for inferiority comparatives not considered – e.g. Czech

Czech:

(13) a. *inteligentnější* 'more intelligent'
b. *méně inteligentní* 'less intelligent

→ morphological comparatives reflect the unmarked [–inferiority] value also in these systems – essentially the same as systems with both bound and unmarked degree markers

5 A proposal for Indo-European

combination of the variables in the sample for the Eurasian area, Indo-European languages (based GramBank):

	[+BOUND]	**[–BOUND]**
[+NON-BOUND]	14	21
[–NON-BOUND]	17	8

significant correlation between the variables: X^2 (1, N = 60) = 4.5784, P=0.03238

in practice:

- systems strongly favour the availability of at least one degree marker
- systems with two [–] values outside of Europe: Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Bundeli, Darai, Eastern Panjabi, Kashmiri, Konkan Marathi, Southern Pashto

but: analytic forms (superiority and/or inferiority) attested in languages with bound markers (exceptions: Kumzari and Lambadi – not confirmed yet)

→ revised system:

	[+BOUND]	**[–BOUND]**
[+NON-BOUND]	29	21
[–NON-BOUND]	2	8

significant correlation between the variables (Fisher exact test): P=0.0392

in practice: bound markers tend to appear in systems with non-bound markers (but not the other way round)

differences in the actual distribution:

- clear dominance of unbound markers – exceptions only in irregular forms (e.g. French, Maltese)
- clear alternation between bound and unmarked markers (e.g. English, Danish)
- dominance of bound markers – but several exceptions (e.g. Dutch, Breton)
- clear dominance of bound markers – exceptions only for inferiority comparatives (e.g. German, Czech)

→ revised system predicted by the markedness relations

6 Conclusion

distribution of bound and unbound markers – focus on European area (SAE type of comparison – particularly in the Indo-European family)

- both bound and unbound markers associated with a [+degree] feature
- second feature: [±inferiority] lexicalised by (most) unbound markers)
- bound markers underspecified for [±inferiority] – associated with the unmarked [–inferiority] value only as a default value
- systems with bound markers more complex (relying on unmarked feature value)

→ typological distribution: tendency in line with markedness relations – revised typological system of Indo-European languages reflects a partial dependency

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