

TYPICAL TYPOLOGY? LOSS OF INFLECTION IN GRADABLE ADJECTIVES IN PRESENT DAY ENGLISH

Lisa Jean Graham

Washington College

During the 18th century, English loses the most noticeable remaining features of structural differences which distance the Early Modern English Period from Present Day English. By the end of that century, the grammar is very close to what it is today. If we take a novel of Jane Austen (1775-1817), we can read for pages before a point of linguistic difference might make us pause. Jane Austen makes demands of our modern English linguistic intuitions. Crystal (1995:76) cites the following example from Austen's *Emma* to illustrate a few of the distinctive grammatical features of early 19th century English, compared with today: 'She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father' and 'the properest manner...' That youngest refers to only two might strike the modern reader as different, yet such language presents no unexpected difficulties in these opening lines. Nor does the inflected superlative form properest disrupt the modern reader's comprehension.

While, by the end of the 18th century, the grammar is very close to what it is today, English grammar has not remained static. Constant remains the fact that most of the grammatical controversies which come from the prescriptive tradition have to do with making a choice between alternative usages already in the language. One such controversy that is currently undergoing variation involves the availability of two ways of expressing higher degree in the quality of an adjective. An examination of traditional grammar in conjunction with current language usage reveals quantifiable linguistic trends. After exploring the semantic and syntactic features and domains of gradable adjectives, determining the traditionally established rules for inflection vs. periphrastic forms of comparison and comparing these to current trends in adjectival gradation manifestation based on data collected from the media and colloquial conversation, I intend to recognize and account for deviations from the prescriptive guidelines, loss of morphological inflection, based on a typological framework of morphological language types.

There are four features commonly considered to be characteristics of adjectives, although not all words traditionally regarded as adjectives possess all of these 4 features. Adjectives can freely occur in attributive and predicative function: they can be premodified by the intensifier very; they can take comparative and superlative forms by means of inflections or by the addition of the premodifiers more and most. The acceptance of premodification by very and the ability to take comparative and superlative forms are determined by a semantic feature, gradability. According to Quirk et al. manifestations of degree and intensity have no diagnostic value in distinguishing adjectives from adverbs (1985:403); thus I will use the term 'degree' or 'gradable' adjective generally to cover both adjectives and adverbs.

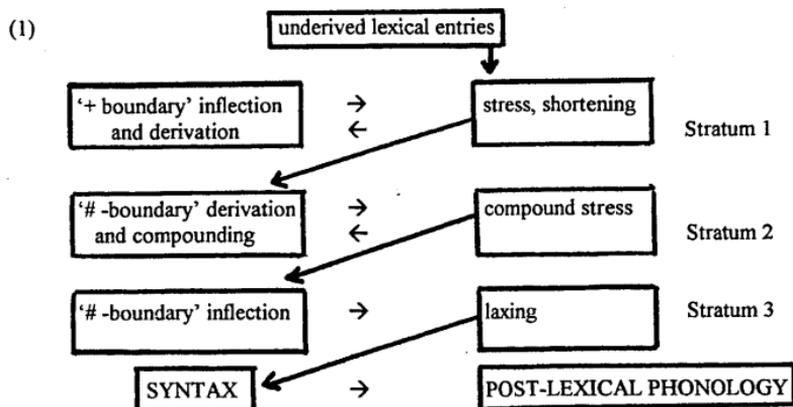
Three semantic scales are applicable to adjectives: stative/dynamic, inherent/noninherent and gradable/nongradable. It is important to realize that we are dealing with scales rather than with a feature that is present or absent, as not all of the relations of a feature are available in each case. Stative adjectives cannot be used with the progressive aspect or with the imperative while a general semantic feature of dynamic adjectives is that they denote qualities that are subject to control by the possessor and are thus susceptible to subjective measurement, as in abusive, adorable, ambitious, brave. The semantic scale of inherency refers to characterizing the referent of the noun directly: a firm handshake, a perfect alibi. Most adjectives are gradable, this aspect being manifested through comparison: tall, ~taller, ~tallest, and through modification by intensifiers: very tall, so tall, totally tall. All dynamic and most stative adjectives are gradable; some stative adjectives are not. As gradability implies the existence of a scale in the semantic structure of the adjective, it is fundamentally a semantic feature and thus cuts across the syntactic subcategorization of adjectives (Rusiecki 1985:3).

Bolinger (1967:4) defines comparability as a semantic feature coextensive with 'having different degrees' or 'susceptible of being laid out on a scale'. Comparability of adjectives answers to a kind of adjective meaning, scalability, which is defined as a range versus a point on a scale. Points or non-ranges on a scale include extremes of the scale: on the scale common-rare-unique, unique represents the extreme and thus something cannot be 'more unique'; similarly, something cannot be 'more perfect'. Mathematically exact quantities indicate a point on a scale and are, therefore, not comparable: you cannot have 'a more single-headed figure' yet, remembering that comparability is based on meaning, not form, 'a more single-minded person' is acceptable. When the suffix -less represents zero it covers a point on the scale and one well cannot be 'more bottomless' than another. Two opposed points, such as plural vs. singular, do not cover a range on the scale, and thus are not comparable. Similarly, other exact points on a scale are not comparable: initial, medial, final.

Inflections provide one of the ways in which the quality expressed by an adjective can be compared. The comparison can be to the same degree, to a higher degree, or to a lower degree. The inflections identify two steps in the expression of a higher degree, comparative and superlative. Alternatively, there is also a syntactic, periphrastic way of expressing higher degree through the use of more and most. The availability of two ways of expressing higher degree raises a usage question: which form should be used with any particular adjective? Traditional grammars state that while no definite rule can be given for determining whether the forms in -er, -est, or those in more, most are correct for any given adjective, the general tendency is based largely on adjective length (Smart 1940:44). Adjectives of one syllable usually take the inflectional form with exceptions such as real, right, wrong. Participle forms which are used as adjectives regularly take only periphrastic forms: interesting, wounded, worn, as in: 'That's the most burnt piece of toast I've ever made.' Trisyllabic or longer adjectives can only take periphrastic forms, with exceptions being adjectives with the negative un- prefix such as unhappy and untidy.

These exceptions may be accounted for by the model of lexical morphology which proposes that affixes are added at different strata in the lexicon. Lexical entries of affixes contain meaning, information about bases, grammatical category of word resulting from affixing them as

well as the stratum at which they are found. Katamba (1993:92) states, 'Each stratum of the lexicon has associated with it a set of morphological rules that do the word-building.' All of these rules are found in the lexicon where they are organized in blocks called strata, levels or layers arranged hierarchically:



Adopting Kiparsky's (1982:5) model of lexical morphology, stratum 1 deals with irregular inflection (e.g. see ~ saw (past tense)) and irregular derivation (e.g. long (adj) ~ length (noun)). Stratum 2 deals with regular derivation (e.g. kind (adj) ~ kindly (adv)) and compounding. Stratum 3 deals with regular inflection. According to this level ordering, the derivational prefix un- would be applied before the regular comparative/superlative inflection, as regular derivational affixes are added at level 2 before inflectional affixes. This principle that the morphological component of a grammar is organized in a series of hierarchical strata therefore accounts for inflected trisyllabic adjectives, such as unhappiest and unhealthiest.

Working within the model of lexical morphology, the question naturally arises: where is the determination to use the variable periphrastic form more/most made? Clearly, it is not an affix and is phonologically neutral. Thus while the -er/-est comparative inflection occurs on the lexical level and is closely tied to morphological rules that build word-structure in the lexicon, the periphrastic more/most is post-lexical rule, not linked to word-formation rule but rather a rule that applies when fully-formed words are put in syntactic phrases.

Semantics may restrict the application of morphological rules and place constraints on productivity as in the case of two words representing two poles on the same semantic scale. The positive end will be treated as unmarked and the less favorable meaning will be derived by prefixing the negative prefix to a positive base. In the polar pair happy/sad, the negative prefix -un is attached to the positive adjective, thereby deriving unhappy and not *unsad, as substantiated by Katamba (1993:78).

Productivity in inflection differs from derivational productivity in that it is general. The addition of particular inflectional affixes is not subject to various arbitrary restrictions. Stems that belong to a given class normally receive all the affixes that belong to that class. Katamba (1993:80) asserts that inflectional morphology exemplifies automatic productivity. If automatic productivity is usually exemplified in inflectional morphology, how can one account for the loss of inflectional morphology in comparative adjectives in favor of the syntactic periphrastic comparison? Does this reflect a typological trend away from automatic productivity? Is the longer periphrastic alternate an instance of hypercorrection? Is it functioning as an overt emphatic marking? Or does the periphrastic form ensure predictability without taking into account the variable of adjective length?

The chief problem in determining which comparative form arises with disyllabic adjectives, many of which permit both inflectional and periphrastic forms of comparison: 'That's a quieter/more quiet place.' 'Her children are politer, more polite.' The choice is often made on stylistic grounds including rhythm and immediate context. Disyllabic adjectives that can most readily take inflected forms are those ending in an unstressed vowel, /l/, or /ǝ/:

- (2) -y: early, easy, funny, happy, noisy, wealthy, pretty
 -ow: mellow, narrow, shallow
 -le: able, feeble, gentle, noble, simple
 -er, -ure: clever, mature, obscure

One can distinguish between adjectives ending in -ly and adjectives ending only in -y. Comparison with periphrasis is common with -ly adjectives, as in friendly, likely, lonely, lively: ~livelier ~liveliest / ~more lively ~most lively. Among adjectives ending only in -y, inflectional comparison is favored, e.g. easy ~easier ~easiest (Quirk 1985:462).

The following data upon which I base my observations and from which I draw conclusions were collected within the past year from the media, including books, magazines, television, films, radio, as well as from colloquial conversation. The motivation for recording current usage of comparative adjectival forms ensued from a noticeable reliance on the periphrastic way of expressing higher degree, especially with adjectives of one syllable. While by no means exhaustive, my data represents current language usage in various social registers.

Figure 3a reflects data collected involving adjectives ending in -ly, belying a consistent tendency for periphrastic comparison, thus reaffirming prescriptive tendencies:

- (3a) -ly (periphrasis common)
 'Mt. Rainer, the highest and most deadly peak in the state of WA.'
 (*Baltimore Sun*)
 'The silence is more deadly than the violence of the storm.'
 (country song lyric)
 'That church is one of the most friendly churches I have ever known.'
 (Ph.D., woman, 50's)

Yet whereas Quirk states that inflectional comparison is favored in -y adjectives (1985:462), my data indicates otherwise:

- (3b) -y (inflectional comparison favored)
'The two men selected were the most worthy candidates.'
(radio)
'They're going to be more picky about whom they do surgery on.'
(BS, woman, 30's)
'And not a goal to become more pretty.'
(Ph.D., man, 40's)
'I expected him to be more angry and contrite.'
(George Stephanopoulos, TV)
'It was more holy.'
(contemporary novel)

Does the tendency favoring inflection or periphrasis stem from a prescriptive tradition? American dictionaries offer inflected comparative and superlative forms along with the entry and word class. Yet despite prescribed inflection, numerous examples of periphrastic comparison are evidenced in my findings. While traditionally accepted that adjectives of one syllable usually take the inflectional form, my data indicates otherwise:

- (4) Monosyllabic adjectives in contemporary usage:
'We live in a more tense age.'
(radio)
'It was the most posh furniture.'
(Ph.D., MD, male, 50's)
'Those shoes are typically more flat across the toes.'
(BS, male, 20's)
'He stopped at the most flat part of the road.'
(BS, male, 30's)
'The occasional moments of weakness only make our love more strong.'
(country lyric)
'Does it make you more sad?'
'It's always the one that's most full.'
(BA, male, 20's)

There are three syntactic variables that may be involved in the decision between inflection and periphrasis: predicate adjectives followed by a than-clause, postpositive adjectives and compound adjectival phrases. As indicated previously, most adjectives that are inflected for comparison can also take the periphrastic forms with more and most. With more, they seem to do so more easily when they are predicative and are followed by a than-clause: 'Peter is more mad than Carlton is.' 'It would be difficult to find a man more brave than he is.' Quirk et al. describe adjectives as predicative when they function as subject complement or object complement (1985:417).

Figure 5a contains examples of predicative adjectival comparison; Figure 5b adjectives followed by a than-clause. Note that even monosyllabic adjectives usually inflected for comparison appear in their periphrastic forms:

- (5a) predicate adjectives inflected for comparison:
 'I picked out the tomato that I thought was the most ripe.'
 'I should have made it more clear.'
 (high school, male, 30's)
 'You never would have known I used them if I had left the towels more neat.'
 (high school, woman, 20's)
 'But it is more than an issue now, because it's more dense.'
 (interviewee, *Post*)
 'It was more broad.'
 (undergraduate, male, 20's)
- (5b) gradable predicate adjectives followed by a than-clause
 'That's more green than the one I just bought.'
 (high school, woman, 40's)
 'You are a little more shy than I am.'
 (BS, woman, 30's)
 'We've made it more dirty than it ever was.'
 (Ph.D., man, 30's)
 'You think just because I have a lisp that you are more smart than I am?'
 (undergraduate, male, 20's)

Postpositivity is another syntactic variable that may have an effect on the whether a degree adjective is inflected or adverbally modified. Adjectives can immediately follow the noun or pronoun they modify, as in 'something useful'. A postpositive adjective can usually be regarded as a reduced relative clause: 'something that is useful'. Compound indefinite pronouns and adverbs ending in -body, -one, -thing, and -where can be modified only postpositively: 'I want to try on something (that is) larger' (Quirk 1985:418).

In compound adjectival phrases, the question arises: does the preferred comparative form of the initial adjective influence the comparative form of the 2nd adjective, thus governed by a left-most constraint? My findings in compound adjectival phrases revealed no consistent pattern in determining inflectional vs. periphrastic gradation, indicating combinations of inflectional and periphrastic comparison, unexpected periphrastic comparison with monosyllabic adjectives, as well as the periphrastic form with a disyllabic -y suffix:

- (6) 'Mt. Rainer, the highest and most deadly peak in the state of WA.'
 (*Baltimore Sun*)
 'You can make the mattress more firm and more soft.'
 (Paul Harvey, radio)
 'I expected him to be more angry and contrite.'
 (George Stephanopoulos, TV)

Turning to analysis of grammar and language outside and beyond the scope of Present Day English that might reveal tendencies, thereby offering an account for language change, the theory of Universal Grammar bases its inquiries on data from an extensive sample of languages. New generalizations as to the nature of human languages may come to be formulated by a comparison of the structural properties of a large variety of languages. These generalizations may then be used as a supplement, as an evaluative measure of the regularities which have been discovered in the study of single instances of natural language. The main linguistic importance of typologies lies in the fact that they can be used as data for a further explorations into the non-randomness of linguistic encoding. Furthermore, it is an empirical fact that natural languages show variation in their encoding properties, but it is a basic assumption in all universalist work that languages do not vary in unpredictable ways and that, therefore, typological variations can be subject to explanation (Stassen 1985:5).

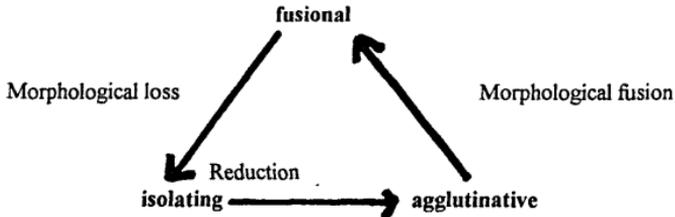
Explanation presupposes the demonstration of a non-randomness, regularity, in the data by means of principles which are, in some intuitive sense, viewed as the causal factor of that regularity. In accordance with Typological Universal Grammar, Stassen categorizes languages in two different ways in his study of the typology of comparative constructions: into a primary comparative construction which is more 'unmarked' than its possible alternatives and into a secondary comparative option. He argues that a language is not completely free in the choice of its secondary comparative(s) (1985:27). This choice can be shown to be governed by the same principles which determine the selection of its primary comparative form. Yet he admits he has not been able to find a principled way to account for the variable phenomenon of morphological marking in English, namely for the variation between inflectional vs. periphrastic comparative marking. He has not succeeded in finding an explanatory principle on the basis of which the presence or absence of the this marking can be predicted (1985:28). I believe this is the point where language typology and typological tendencies can afford explanation.

I will rely on Croft's linguistic definition of typology as it refers to a classification of structural types across languages (1990:1). A language is designated as belonging to a single type, and a typology of languages is a definition of the types and a classification of the languages into those types. The morphological typology of the 19th and early 20th centuries will for the basis for my argument that typological language change may account for the loss of inflection in degree adjectives.

Languages may be classified by morphological types. The morphological loss of inflection characterizes the shift of English and other Germanic languages from synthetic to analytic structure (Lehmann 1994:176). Lehmann states that the development of the comparison-of-inequality construction in the Indo-European dialects provides further evidence for the interrelationship of morphological and syntactic devices in change. Comparative markers such as than in English and als in German were introduced in shifting from the OV pattern, where the standard precedes the adjective, to becoming VO (1994:178). Lehmann's observations as to the grammaticalization of periphrastic verbal forms may be extending to have corresponding validity regarding comparative periphrasis, in that the periphrastic forms make up syntactic units that have a specific meaning, comparable to that of simple forms (1994:180).

Since the 1800's, linguists have suggested that languages tend to change their morphological type over time. While August Schliecher proposed the teleological view that languages evolved toward increasing sophistication from isolating to agglutinative to fusional, the claim that languages do switch from one morphological type to another has found some empirical support. The potential change between morphological types can be viewed as a cycle. Consider:

(7)



Semantic and phonological reduction commonly operate together to create a novel morpheme that becomes more closely associated with a neighboring word, transforming an isolating language to an agglutinative one. Similar to that transformation is the process whereby agglutinative languages become fusional. The frequent co-occurrence of two adjacent morphemes lends itself to reanalyzing the combination as a single unit that fuses together phonological and semantic features of the erstwhile morphemes. The development of largely isolating Modern English from Old English, which had a more vigorous morphological system of the fusional type, illustrates that fusional languages can become isolating.

The realization that ideal morphological types do not really exist is supported by Sapir's belief that 'the terms are more useful in defining certain drifts than as absolute counters' (1921:136). After all, just how fusional a language must a language be before it can be said to be altering its path toward becoming isolating? Does this cycle in Figure 7 depict what happens to entire languages or what happens to certain parts of the morphology of languages? Again referring to Sapir, 'language classifications are neat constructions of the speculative mind and are, hence, slippery things' (1921: 153).

While this model remains an unconfirmed hypothesis, it is one that can be used to account for this language change. It takes a great deal of time for a language to shift from one morphological type to another. The transition toward one type or another, as from a synthetic to an analytical language, is not a development toward an ideal, but is a reflection of various smaller changes going on within the linguistic system. The changes may be phonological or semantic, as in the case of grammaticalization or in the loss of certain kinds of morphology, as illustrated by the loss of morphological inflection in Present Day English adjectival comparison.

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