

LINGUISTICS

COMPARATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH¹

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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	PARAMATER	MARK	STANDARD

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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.² 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.

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 Declerck (1991: 342-5).

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* /-ə(r)/, or a modifier *more*, /m:ə/ or /mœ/. There are corresponding superlative Indexes *-est*, /-əst/ or /-ist/, and *most*, /moust/. The negative index of comparison has a single form, comparative *less*, /les/, and superlative *least* /li:st/.

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

	PLAIN	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
big	<i>micel</i>	<i>māra</i>	<i>māest</i>
little	<i>lȳtel</i>	<i>lāssa</i>	<i>lāest</i>

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, *littler* and *littlest*, 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:

PLAIN	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
<i>good</i>	<i>better</i>	<i>best</i>
<i>bad</i>	<i>worse</i>	<i>worst</i>
<i>far</i>	<i>farther/further</i>	<i>farthest/furthest</i>

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.

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 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.³ 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 /ə/ or ✓ in Table 1 indicate that this is a less preferred possibility.

The orthographic form *-er* has the following phonological forms:

- i) /-gə/ after a monosyllable ending in /ŋ/; for example, *long*, /'lɒŋ/, *longer*, /'lɒŋgə/,
- ii) /-ə/ elsewhere, that is: after a consonant other than /ŋ/, as in *wide*, /'waɪd/, *wider*, /'waɪdə/; after a vowel other than /ə/, as in *grey*, /'greɪ/, *greyer*, /'greɪə/; *true*, /'tru:/, *truer*, /'tru(:)ə/; *pretty*, /'prɪti/, *prettier*, /'prɪtiə/.

A set of adjectives have orthographic form ending in <r> or <re> 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 /-rə/, as realisation of comparative *-er* after /ə/; for example, *dear* /'diə/, *dearer* /'diərə/, *tender* /'tendə/, *tenderer* /'tendərə/, *obscure* /əb'skjuə/, *obscurer* /əb'skjuərə/.

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 elf* /smɔ:lər elf/.

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 monosyllabics ending in /ə/, 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 /kruəl/); 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 /ə/, which, with the “linking r”, add /-rə/ for example, *clever* /'klevə/, *cleverer* /'klevərə/.

Some adjectives in set B may use *more* as an alternative to *-er*. This applies most to those ending in /uə/ or in plain /ə/ where, for example, either of *securer* 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

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 /l/ generally take *-er*; for example, *simple* /'simpl/, *simpler* /'simplə/. Those which end in /ə/ (*loyal, royal, formal*) count as disyllabic consonant-final and are confined to *more*. *Evil* may have the form /'i:v/ or /'i:vil/; it does not take *-er*, suggesting that /'i:vil/ calls the tune. *Idle* /'aidl/ satisfies the criterion for *-er*, with a final syllabic /l/; 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 /l/, most of these are pretty well confined to *more*; *rottener* is rather marginal and **suddener* quite unacceptable. (There is time adverb *often*, with no corresponding adjective, which allows both *oftener* 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 monomorphemic disyllabic forms ending in /i/ (such as *happy*) in taking *-er*. They differ from them 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 *solider*. 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 /t/. 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)	$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{handsome} \\ \text{stupid} \\ \text{friendly} \end{array} \right\}$	in preference to	$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{very much} \\ \text{handsomer} \\ \text{stupider} \\ \text{friendlier} \end{array} \right\}$
<i>very much more</i>			

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*.⁴ 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 fullish list of exceptions. The rows in the table will be commented on in turn.

- An adjective which forms its comparative with *-er*, and derives an adverb with *-ly*, adds *more* to the adverb for comparison.
- 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.
- Those adjectives which use *more* for comparative, and form an adverb with *-ly*, also use *more* for comparison of the adverb.
- 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: **friendlyly* 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*.

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.

- e) 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 quick/slow* as an alternative to *walk quickly/slowly*. In keeping with this, the comparative adverb may be either *quicker/slower* or *more quickly/slowly*.⁵
- f) 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*.
- g) 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 **earlyly*.) In accord with this, the comparative adjectives are also used as comparative adverbs.
- h) *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 of *-er* (/ɪst/ or /əst/ replacing the /ə(r)/ 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:

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 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{(the) best} \\ \text{(the) slowest} \\ \text{(the) most fluently} \\ \text{(the) most carefully} \end{array} \right\}$ 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, *more (than)*, *less (than)*, and *as (as)*. Consider:

- 18) John is *more* intelligent *than* Fred.
 19) Fred is *less* intelligent *than* John.
 20) John is *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 *not more* intelligent *than* Fred.
 22) Fred is *not less* intelligent *than* John.
 23) John is *not so/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 *less* are not very frequent; instead of *less dangerous than*, we often say *not so dangerous as*, and whenever there are two adjectives of opposite meaning we say, for instance, *weaker than*, rather than *less strong than*".

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

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 at least as intelligent as Fred*.

- 24) $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{More men than women} \\ \text{Less (or fewer) men than women} \\ \text{As many men as women} \end{array} \right\}$ voted for the president.

- 25) Last year, Japan imported $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{more whiskey than gin.} \\ \text{less whiskey than gin.} \\ \text{as much whiskey as gin.} \end{array} \right\}$

An alternative to *as many as* is *as few as*. Then, *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 *as much as* is *as little as*. This provides a paradigm for quantity terms:

	PLAIN	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
COUNTABLE	many	more	most
MASS			
COUNTABLE	few	less	least
MASS			

The comparative and superlative of *few* can be *fewer* and *fewest* (forms preferred by prescriptivists), as alternatives to *less* and *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 *more (than)*, *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.

The possibilities are illustrated in:

27)

a. Mary dances	i. more than	a. John sings
b. Mary speaks French	ii. more often than	b. John speaks German
c. Mary designs gardens	iii. better than	c. John constructs gardens
d. Mary writes stories	iv. more slowly than/ slower than	d. John paints pictures
e. Mary likes jazz	v. more vigorously than	e. John dislikes rock
f. Insincerity annoys Mary		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*;⁷
- 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

⁷ Note that there is also the phrasal preposition *as well as*. The comparative *as well as* is unambiguous in *Mary speaks French as well as John speaks German*. However, the reduced version *Mary speaks French as well as John* is ambiguous between a comparative reading (the excellence of Mary's speaking French is on a par with the excellence of John's speaking French) and a prepositional reading (Mary speaks French and John does so too).

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]

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 (intelligence)*, alongside *John is more intelligent than Mary*.

(b) Transitive verbs such as *exceed* and *surpass* basically indicate a comparison 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* relates 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:

COMPARATIVE ADJECTIVE	PLAIN VERB	INHERENTLY COMPARATIVE VERB
better	like	prefer
much better	*much like	much prefer
very much better	very much like	very much prefer

The inherently comparative verb *prefer* can be modified by *much*, like a comparative adjective, unlike the corresponding plain verb *like*.⁸

(d) The grammatical combination *would rather* (which behaves quite differently 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-*

⁸ 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).

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 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{the various Roman generals.} \\ \text{Caesar and Augustus.} \end{array} \right\}$

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 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{as holiday destinations.} \\ \text{in terms of life-style.} \end{array} \right\}$

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 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{as a holiday destination.} \\ \text{in terms of life-style.} \end{array} \right\}$

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 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{doesn't compare} \\ \text{compares favourably} \end{array} \right\}$ with Tahiti $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{as a holiday destination.} \\ \text{in terms of life-style.} \end{array} \right\}$

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 compare favourably as holiday destinations*. (The topic of "promotion to subject" is discussed in Dixon 1991: 322-35, 2005: 446-58.)

Table 1. Choice of *-er* or *more*

SET	FORM OF ADJECTIVE	EXAMPLES	-er HAS FORM	CAN <i>more</i> BE USED?		
A	Monosyllabic	end in /y/	/-gə/	-		
		end in another consonant	/-ə/	-		
	B	Disyllabic, monomorphemic, ending in vowel or syllabic /l/	end in /ə/	/-rə/	((✓))	
			end in another vowel	/-ə/	-	
		C	Disyllabic, bimorphemic, ending in vowel	end in /i/	/-ə/	-
				end in /ou/	/-ə/	(✓)
				end in syllabic /l/	/-ə/	(✓)
				end in plain /ə/	/-rə/	✓
				end in /tə/	/-rə/	✓
				end in suffix -y, /-i/	/-ə/	✓
C	Disyllabic, bimorphemic, ending in vowel	end in suffix -ly, /-li/	/-ə/	✓		
		end in suffix -ly, /-li/	/-ə/	✓		

Table 1. Continued

D	All others	Disyllabic and longer, end in consonant	-	✓
		Exceptions	/-ə/	✓
		Trisyllabic and longer, end in vowel	-	✓
E	Adjectives with prefix <i>un-</i> or <i>im-</i>	from set A	(-ə)	✓
		from set B	(-ə)	✓
		from set C	(-ə)	✓
		from set D	(-ə)	✓
			-	✓

Table 2. Comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs

	ADJECTIVES		ADVERBS	
	PLAIN	COMPARATIVE	PLAIN	COMPARATIVE
(a)	rude	ruder	rudely	more rudely
(b)	happy	happier	happily	more happily
(c)	stupid	stupider or more stupid	stupidly	more stupidly
(d)	direct	more direct	directly	more directly
(e)	friendly	friendlier or more friendly	-	-
(e)	quick	quicker	quick or quickly	quicker or more quickly
	slow	slower	slow or slowly	slower or more slowly
(f)	good	better	well	better
	bad	worse	badly	worse
(g)	fast	faster	fast	faster
	hard	harder	hard	harder
	early	earlier	early	earlier
	late	later	late	later
(h)	long	longer	long or lengthily	longer or more lengthily

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