

CERTAIN MORPHO-SEMANTIC IMPLICATIONS WITH THE GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY OF COMPARISON IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. *It has been noticed that the existing literature on the English language does not treat the phenomenon of incomparable or absolute adjectives to the necessary extent. This refers primarily to the most influential grammar books of the language. The present paper is concerned with the problem of comparison of absolute adjectives, as well as with the relation of definiteness and comparability and the analysis of periphrastic structures for comparative formation with simple adjectives and adverbs. A possible classification of incomparable adjectives into five groups has been offered here, as well as an interpretation of certain occurrences in the intersection of form and meaning when it comes to the grammatical category of comparison.*

Key words: *English Language, Comparison, Incomparable Adjectives, Definiteness*

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of certain aspects that correlate the semantics of adjectives and adverbs in English more closely with their form. To put it more precisely, the paper aims at putting to the foreground the morphological elements that affect the semantic frame of the grammatical category of comparison with adjective word forms and constructions. Another focus of this article is to argue on a more general level whether the rules concerning adjective comparison that can be found in English grammar books are to be considered adequate, or rather prescriptive and at times even quite restrictive. Many native speakers have been aware of this issue for a period of time. The domain of comparison of adjectives and adverbs has been covered with a veil of complexity and fuzziness, a rather problematic area which many authors have avoided for the lack of system and consistency. The problem has not been regarded with great concern, and the general attitude can be transferred into words which are chiefly along the lines of the commentator who laconically put it in these two comments printed as early as the beginning of the last century:

- (1) a. "*We all compare incomparable adjectives every day, but no harm arises from the practice...*"¹
- b. "*Everybody, almost, compares incomparable adjectives every day, and as no confusion of meaning or understanding results, it is not worth while to make a fuss about the matter.*"²

From this point of view, the question that can be posed now is whether this kind of adjectives should be marked as incomparable at all, or whether we should reconsider the sections in grammar books that refer to absolute adjectives, i.e. adjectives that have no comparison. At least, having re-thought the subject, one may wonder whether the list of the incomparables that is offered to the students of the language should be revised. This inquiry is based on a number of examples of adjective use in English where there occur considerable swerves from the basic grammatical norm, due to which certain semantic effects are achieved. On the other hand, it can be questioned whether the speakers of English are particularly inclined to violate the rules of language that pertain to comparing what is otherwise incomparable when it comes to adjectives or adverbs.

Among the basic topics dealt with in this paper, together with the issues involving comparison of absolute adjectives are the ones pertaining to the relation of definiteness and comparability, or how an identifying effect can be achieved with the use of articles in comparison outside the established set of general uses. Moreover, certain cases of employing periphrastic formations required for the comparison of "inflectional" adjectives have been taken under scrutiny in an attempt to detect any finer semantic distinctions. The questions listed here have been discussed within separate segments of the paper.

2. ENGLISH ADJECTIVE OR ADVERB COMPARISON – THE BASICS REVISITED

The story of English adjective or adverb comparison sounds fairly simple and straight-forward. Basically, the grammatical category of comparison in English has three elements: the positive, the comparative and the superlative,³ and three poles, each of which contributes to the category in a smaller or larger proportion. First, the system of regular comparison involves the application of inflectional suffixes *-er*, as the comparative degree marker and *-est*, as the superlative degree marker. Normally, since this system is based on endings of Germanic origin, the words that take these inflections are Anglo-Saxon and are said to have fewer than three syllables. The second pole of English comparison refers to periphrastic comparative and superlative formation by using the analytic *more* and *the most*, or the diminutives *less* and *the least*. This system pertains to words of Greek, Latin or French derivation, adjectives of more substantial phonemic content (three or more syllables), and those formed with derivational suffixes other than *-ly*, *-y*. In between are the two-syllable words which can have both the inflectional or periphrastic comparison. The third pole of English comparison is irregular comparison, which would not conform to either of the previous two, and customarily involves vowel

¹ See *Topics of the Times*, The New York Times, May 23rd, 1900.

² See *Topics of the Times*, The New York Times, September 4th, 1900.

³ Certain grammarians have labelled the positive degree as "absolute". See Greenbaum, Sydney (1996) *The Oxford English Grammar*, Oxford: OUP, p.139

mutation, or partial and complete suppletive forms as in *old – elder – eldest*, *little – less – least* or *bad – worse – worst*.

This is how the grammatical category of comparison is generally presented in textbooks and reference books of the English language, and only exceptionally can there occur instances of true descriptivism and observations of the usage that spreads all over the speech community and that at certain points flouts the stipulations of the grammarians.

The irregular comparison forms of *bad* are treated variously in nonstandard dialects. In place of comparative *worse* we find *badder* (a regularized form), *worser* (double comparative form), and *worserer* (treble comparative form). In place of superlative *worst* we find the double superlative forms *worstest* and *worstest*.

(Greenbaum, 1996:140)

However, aside from the above mentioned instance of presenting a wider image of comparison in the language, few treatments of this linguistic phenomenon have served justly to the ideal of obtaining a genuine idea about what happens in real life language use when qualities of entities or actions are to be taken into account, particularly if the quality is viewed in comparative structures.

3. COMPARISON AND ABSOLUTENESS

Adjectives or adverbs are gradable items from the lexicon due to the fact that most of the qualities in the extra-linguistic reality (ELR) they refer to are gradable or perceivable to be present in varying degrees in experience. However, this ineluctably implies that only qualitative adjectives can be graded, whereas derived and relative adjectives cannot. Adjectives are gradable in proportion and correspondence with the gradability of the quality in question, and in principle, there holds a general truth that the more gradable the quality, the more gradable the adjectives. This is best viewed in the presence of the typical intensifiers that can accompany adjectives and positively identify them, so that a feature of an entity can be described as *quite*, *rather*, *so*, *too*, *very*, etc.

It is a well-established postulation that there exist adjectives in language that cannot be compared, as verified by a number of descriptions of various language systems, the English grammatical system as well. The adjectives of this sort are called incomparable adjectives and they are said to refer to a quality which is already present in its utmost quantity, or by its nature resists any attempts at comparing the quality with different entities in varying grades. In other words, the quality represented by the adjectival formation is not perceived as a discrete category, but rather as something given as *a priori* absolute. There are several segments of related words that can be identified within the domain of incomparable or "absolute" adjectives, as these modifier lexemes are also known (Peters, 2004). Obviously, the meanings these lexemes convey are also to be taken as absolute. For the purpose of this survey, the absolute adjectives have been presented in five distinct groups, summing up the erstwhile treatments of the problem of absolute adjectives.

The first segment would incorporate adjectives that refer primarily to humans and express qualities limited by the laws of nature, be they biological, physical or any other, thus rendering the adjectives exempt from comparability.

<i>alive</i>	<i>dead</i>	<i>mute</i>
<i>blind</i>	<i>late</i>	<i>pregnant</i>

The second group includes adjectives that refer to certain qualities of the outside world, as well as ordinal numerals.

<i>bottom</i>	<i>left</i>	<i>top</i>
<i>double</i>	<i>right</i>	<i>triple</i>
<i>first</i>	<i>second</i>	<i>vertical</i>
<i>horizontal</i>	<i>straight</i>	

The third and arguably the largest group is composed of adjectives that refer to qualities already present in the highest degree possible, so that they can not be surpassed.

<i>absolute</i>	<i>final</i>	<i>real</i>
<i>acme</i>	<i>full</i>	<i>supreme</i>
<i>chief</i>	<i>infinite</i>	<i>total</i>
<i>complete</i>	<i>paramount</i>	<i>ultimate</i>
<i>countless</i>	<i>perfect</i>	<i>unique</i>
<i>eternal</i>	<i>permanent</i>	<i>universal</i>
<i>extreme</i>	<i>prime</i>	<i>utmost</i>

The fourth section collects all those adjectives that are not logically possible to bring in connection to comparison in any possible sense, due to the fact that comparison would involve breaching rules of logic, time or sequencing.

<i>daily</i>	<i>mutual</i>	<i>simultaneous</i>
<i>fatal</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>triangular</i>
<i>former</i>	<i>previous</i>	<i>wrong</i>
<i>monthly</i>	<i>several</i>	<i>yearly</i>

The fifth group involves the so-called relative adjectives that mark the adjectives of possession and origin. Naturally, the adjectives presented here, which holds for the other groups as well, need not present the entire set, but are to be taken as representatives of a model group.

<i>American</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Italian</i>
<i>English</i>	<i>German</i>	<i>Serbian</i>

However, regardless of the various accounts registered which have claimed the opposite and regardless of the above list, it is an undeniable fact that language communication, particularly the one occurring in terms of colloquial informal speech, may contain structures where these adjectives have been brought in comparative relationship, or at least perceived as referring to gradable qualities. Some of the authors place side by side a statement about the incomparability of adjectives and a claim that they can be turned gradable depending on the situation, as can be seen from the ensuing statement.

Many kinds of adjective don't support any *degrees of comparison* – the quality they refer to cannot be graded. A definitive adjective like *French* (in *French cask*) either is or is not true. (*More French than the French* turns it ad hoc into a *gradable adjective*.)

(Peters, 2004:17)

On the other hand, it is not so infrequently heard that a person is *rather dead now* or *very much alive*, albeit for humorous purposes. This is to state that these forms and these purposes should not present forms of illegitimate communication by means of language, and should not be excluded from the regular communication code. What is more, it should be pointed out that this kind of use is outside the limits that figurative language poses upon lexical items, or to put it differently, these appear even when the denotative meaning of the lexemes is taken in the sentential context, having in mind the flexibility of semantic implications when the figurative or transferred meanings are considered, for instance *dead* as "inactive" or "boring" and *alive* as "vibrant" or "energetic". In this respect, the discussion presented in Peters 2004 seems to have stricken the right key: "The fact that a word may have both comparable and noncomparable senses seems to be overlooked. [...] comprehensive dictionaries show that such adjectives have both nongradable and gradable senses. The gradable sense is clearly being used in 'a more complete account of events than ever before.' So the notion of *absoluteness* needs to be attached to the sense, not the whole word."⁴

However, this does not mean that there may occur forms as **deader - the deadeast* or **aliver - the alivest* without raising a few eyebrows among the listeners. This is irrespective of the fact that the American Heritage Dictionary lists the former as an inflectional paradigm for the adjective *dead*.⁵

It is possibly less than ever an issue of grammar whether absolute adjectives are gradable or not. Even qualities that were until recently regarded as "all-or-none", qualities such as one's sex and nationality,⁶ as in *male*, *Austrian*, etc. are no longer so "absolute" or at least should not be taken as such. There are various questions that may be raised in connection to the gender of transsexuals, sex-changeovers and she-males, and the degree of the presence of this particular quality on the continuous scale of sexuality. At least, more individuals may readily understand the comparative *more male* and *less male* in this context than not. As for the adjectives derived from nationality nouns, these are not likely to appear in the superlative degree, but it is possible to position intensifiers for comparatives. When structures like *more German than the Germans* or *it is very English of you* appear, it is only selected features of the nominal entities that are regarded as gradable, not the entirety of the characteristics.⁷

Obviously, it is questionable whether an adjective or adverb which is not gradable can obtain gradability under any circumstances. If it can assume any propensities of a gradable adjective, whether for stylistic reasons, humoristic effects or figurative meaning, this means that the adjective is capable of comparison. Only notions of qualities that cannot be viewed as comparable may be expressed by absolute adjectives, in which case

⁴ Peters, Pam (2004) *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, Cambridge: CUP, p.8.

⁵ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000) Fourth Edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

⁶ See Geoffrey Leech, et al. (1982) *English Grammar for Today*, Basingstoke /London: The Macmillan Press, p 48.

⁷ Quirk, R./ Greenbaum, S. /Leech, G./ Svartvik, J. (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London and New York: Longman, p. 469-470.

there can occur no obstacle in understanding the act of communication. As long as there is no hindrance in the process of exchanging elements of language, as long as the meaning of the interlocutors is "conceivable" to one another, no restrictions can prove effective or necessary. Some of this attitude may be clearer in the light of the perfectly lucid idea of George Orwell presented in a nutshell in his novel *Animal Farm* (1945): "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Can it be *more perfect* than that? The vagueness of the edges that distinguish gradable adjectives from the absolute ones is perhaps even more conspicuous when we oppose the following claim to a series of questions:

Contrasted to adjectives with such "gradable" meanings are qualitative adjectives with "absolute" meaning, e. g.: *real, equal, perfect, right*, etc. These are, in their referents, incapable of such gradations. Unmodified, they mean the absolute of what they say. With *more* and *most* or when inflected they mean "*more nearly real*", "*nearest of all to being real*", "*more nearly equal*" or "*nearest of all to being equal*", etc.

(Rayevska, 1979:91)

Is it the case that the mentioned adjectives such as *real, right* or *wrong* are incapable of any gradations? Obviously, comparative and superlative forms **realer* and **realist* or **righter/rightest* cannot be expected, but the English language recognizes the so-called periphrastic comparison with *more* and *most* as a legitimate way of indicating gradability, or transferring complex phenomena from the ELR and delicate shades of meaning into language, if need be even with monosyllabic adjectives.

And still, there is a lot of room for debate concerning these matters. For instance, why should *real* be taken completely as an absolute adjective, and *strong* should not? Or *vertical* for that matter, since it is one of the adjectives that appears so often in the accounts of similar adjectives. The term *absolute degree* which is used to substitute the term *positive degree* does better justice to the phenomenon than the latter one, thus signalling than any adjective in its "base" form indicates the quantity of presence of the quality in question at its highest level. As such, it cannot be altered in the sense that it can reach any higher degree than *strong*. A person is either *strong* or not. It is only in view of other individuals that grading qualities assumes any considerable importance.

4. COMPARISON AND DEFINITENESS

As a category of grammaticalization of identifiability of referents, definiteness is typical of nouns. However, it has an implication with adjective superlatives, where the definite article *the* indicates identifiability of the presence of a quality in its supreme quantity, as in *the smartest, the earliest* or *the most superstitious*. At times, this syntagmatic pair can be broken, and an intensifier may interfere, as in the frequently employed phrases *the very best hits, the very highest quality*, etc. Obviously, the definiteness signaled by the article has a real function with the superlative degree forms, synthetic or analytical ones.

Just when does the definite article accompany the comparative form? When does definiteness go along with non-absolute forms? There are three appearances of the definite article with adjective comparatives. The first is when the comparative immediately precedes the modified noun and follows the article, as in (2), in elliptical phrases where

the comparative has been almost substantivized, as in (3) and the so-called parallel increase (Jespersen, 1965:368), as manifested in (4). The combination in (5), however, is the one with somewhat broader semantic implications. At least, in this sentence the definite article is not a proponent of the category of definiteness as much as it is in (2) and (3), but rather substitutes the quantifier *more* intensifying the meaning of the adjective. As opposed to (4) where this effect is better viewed, in the example to follow the first part of the parallel is omitted, but the comparative meaning is no more obfuscated for that.

(2) *And based on every analysis, of every bit of research and every poll that has been taken and every state that a Democrat has to win, I am **the stronger** candidate against John McCain in the fall.*

(3) *As Estelle leaves, she decides that she is, after all, **the stronger** of the two.*

(4) *The weaker you get **the stronger** they become.*

(5) *A: I have lost many things, and now I am losing you...*

*B: You are going to be **the stronger** for that.*

It should be kept in mind that the tendency to avoid double comparison has been present in standard English for the last three centuries or so, and in certain English dialects structures like *more stronger* are still acceptable.⁸ All this may signal that there still exists an inherent need by the speakers of the language to intensify the comparative form, as a natural corollary of the striving for achieving adequate shades of meaning and precision in language, to specify further even the structures not taken as absolute.

Further on, there is a comparative structure that involves the intrusion of the definite article in between the premodifier and the head in an adjectival syntagm. Obviously, the definite article here has a function of indicating relative comparison, as opposed to the absolute one. Actually, the comparative degree here is established in relation to a set of all other entities that may be taken into account with regard to the given quality.

(6) *It all helps to take the ecological heat out of consumerism, a strategy that needn't only be applied to prosaic stuff such as washing machines. You can even take a transumerist approach to that icon of contemporary fashion, the 'it' bag. Yes, with an annual subscription to a bag library (www.be-a-fashionista.co.uk) you can borrow a Birkin or lease a Louis Vuitton and nobody will be **any the wiser**.⁹*

The structure of the idiomatic *any the wiser* in (6) cannot be understood as the presence of a greater quantity of wisdom of the individual in total, but rather as more of it in regard to the issue of shopping relative to all the parties interested in the matter in particular. The alternative to this comparative structure would be *any wiser*, but its meaning would implicate a much wider scope, a comparison which would miss the point in this limited context. Here, the definite article has a function of specifying the referent as the benchmark in comparison in terms of the quality in question.

⁸ See Greenbaum, Sydney (1996) *The Oxford English Grammar*, Oxford: OUP, p.140.

⁹ *The Observer* on Sunday, September 07 2008, p. 73.

5. PERIPHRASTIC COMPARISON AND MEANING

Periphrastic comparison of adjectives and adverbs is supposedly the less common of the two principle modalities of comparison in English. At least this is clearly stated in Quirk, et al (1985), based on the Survey of English Usage.¹⁰ This statement is to implicate that there are more adjectives in the language the morphological structure of which requires the synthetic type of comparison. Be that as it may, another statement from the book may shift the point of view at this phenomenon. In this seminal work on the English language, the authors supply the following note: "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." (Quirk, et al, 1985:462) Presumably, the opposite is not the case, and the adjectives that are periphrastically compared cannot be inflected for comparison, for instance *more interesting* to be substituted for **interesting-er*. Now, this can only be construed as a confirmation of the idea that periphrastic comparison is more inclusive, that it has a greater comparison potential, so to speak, than the inflectional one.

The regularity of applying the inflectional endings to the adjective base for comparison is dependent on various factors, phonological, morphological and semantic. Apparently, there are fewer limitations to periphrastic comparison. Authors have suggested the use of periphrastic comparison even with single syllable adjectives purely for euphonic purposes (Rozakis, 2003:50). Many others have commented that such usage is allowed only occasionally, predominantly for stylistic reasons, or in informal contexts,¹¹ as shown by the instances in (7).

- (7) a. *I am **the more bad** because I realize where my badness lies.*
 b. *This was never **more true** than at present.*¹²

All these observations contribute to the idea that periphrastic comparison has a particular semantic value, slightly different from the inflectional comparison. Even though it may not be considerably different in essence from the comparison by adding inflectional suffixes in terms of gradability, periphrastic comparison happens to possess wider, more encompassing application with various kinds of adjectives or adverbs. Furthermore, there should be registered another semantic distinction, rather than stylistic, when it comes to employing the periphrastic comparison even with adjectives normally compared inflectionally.

- (8) *She was exactly Sophie Mol's height. More short than Syrian Christians, despite her best efforts.*¹³

In (8) the author intentionally employs periphrastic comparison for *short* in place of the regular form *shorter*. Along with the conscious attempt on the part of the novelist to focus the attention to this language structure, there is a point of distinction that the analytical structure conveys. The implication here is that periphrasis involves a more defin-

¹⁰ Quirk, R./ Greenbaum, S. /Leech, G./ Svartvik, J. (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London and New York: Longman, p. 463.

¹¹ see Carter, Ronald / McCarthy, Michael (2006) *Cambridge Grammar of English*, Cambridge: CUP, p.

¹² Weiner E.S.C. / Delahunty, Andrew (Editors) (1994) *The Oxford Guide to English Usage*, Oxford: OUP, p. 166.

¹³ Roy, Arundathi (1998) *The God of Small Things*, New York: Harper Collins, p. 170

ing, generic kind of meaning instead of implying sheer comparison of entities upon a certain feature. The reader is to understand that Syrian Christians are generally or customarily short individuals and that "shortness" is the norm with them. This shade of meaning escapes us with the potential comparison of the adjective *short* by means of a synthetic grammatical form.

6. CONCLUSION

The above discussion has lead us to conclude that the grammatical category of comparison is far more complex than the systemic descriptions of the language would suggest within their treatment of adjectives and adverbs. The explanatory notes provided by the authors and editors are stereotypical in their brevity and steadfastness, rigidity and exclusivity. If language description is to be impartial and devoid of any prescriptivism, it has to take into account a much wider context, the living language practice and the interrelation between language and reality.

This paper serves the purpose of drawing wider attention to the fact that comparison is much more present in language than customarily assumed and that in its volatility it may engage comparing entities and actions at a much larger scale than usually professed by the grammarians in the books dealing with the English language. Some of the points that have been highlighted here seem to be missing even in the most comprehensive of grammars of the language.

Within the problem of absoluteness in comparison, five different groups of incomparable adjectives have been proposed in the paper, and as it has been shown, even adjectives with such propensities allow for comparing in language. The contexts where this occurs vary, but are largely a part of colloquial language. On the other hand, having in mind the development of language and the change that occurs in the extra-linguistic reality, we should perhaps call for "minimalism" in grammar descriptions of comparison in the years to come in the sense that fewer comparative structures should be regarded as "ungrammatical", "impossible" or "unacceptable". The definite article, which normally establishes the superlative degree by defining the ultimate referent quality, has a separate meaning when combined with comparative degree adjectives, adding to the intensity of the characteristic in question.

As the final point, the periphrastic variety of comparison in English also appears to have a specific semantic value. It is to signal the insistence on the positive as the defining generic property when it is used with forms normally marked by grammatical endings for the comparative or superlative degree.

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NEKE MORFOSEMANTIČKE IMPLIKACIJE KOD GRAMATIČKE KATEGORIJE POREĐENJA U ENGLESKOM JEZIKU

Vladimir Ž. Jovanović

Uočeno je da postojeća literatura o engleskom jeziku ne obrađuje pojavu neporedivih prideva u neophodnom obimu. Ova konstatacija se pre svega odnosi na najuticajnije gramatike engleskog jezika. Rad se tiče problema poređenja apsolutnih prideva, kao i odnosa kategorije određenosti i poredivosti i analize perifrazičkih struktura koje se koriste za formiranje oblika komparativa kod prostih prideva i priloga. Pored toga, u radu je ponuđena jedna moguća podela neporedivih prideva u pet određenih grupa, kao i interpretacija nekih pojava u preseku forme i značenja kada je gramatička kategorija poređenja u pitanju.

Ključne reči: engleski jezik, poredjenje, pridevi koji se ne mogu porediti, odredjenost