

ENGLISH ADJECTIVE COMPARISON

AMSTERDAM STUDIES IN THE THEORY AND
HISTORY OF LINGUISTIC SCIENCE

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(Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, Typologie
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Series IV – CURRENT ISSUES IN LINGUISTIC THEORY

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Volume 299

Victorina González-Díaz

English Adjective Comparison

A historical perspective

ENGLISH ADJECTIVE COMPARISON

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

VICTORINA GONZÁLEZ-DÍAZ

University of Liverpool

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA



TM

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences — Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

González-Díaz, Victorina.

English adjective comparison : a historical perspective / Victorina González-Díaz.

p. cm. -- (Amsterdam studies in the theory and history of linguistic science. Series IV, Current issues in linguistic theory, ISSN 0304-0763 ; v. 299)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English language--Adjective. 2. English language--Comparison. I. Title.

PE1241.G66 2008

425'.5--dc22

2008023398

ISBN 978 90 272 4815 2 (Hb; alk. paper)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. • P.O.Box 36224 • 1020 ME Amsterdam • The Netherlands

John Benjamins North America • P.O.Box 27519 • Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 • USA

Ángeles, Ramón, Jaime
Va por ustedes

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Acknowledgements

<i>Adiós, ríos; adiós, fontes;</i>	<i>Farewell, rivers; farewell fountains</i>
<i>adiós, regatos pequenos;</i>	<i>farewell, little streams;</i>
<i>adiós, vista dos meus ollos:</i>	<i>farewell, beloved view:</i>
<i>non sei cando nos veremos.</i>	<i>I don't know when we will see each other again</i>
(...)	
<i>amoriñas das silveiras</i>	<i>sweet berries from the bramble patches</i>
<i>que eu lle daba ó meu amor,</i>	<i>which I used to give to my beloved</i>
<i>caminiños antre o millo,</i>	<i>paths across the wheat fields</i>
<i>¡adiós, para sempre adiós!</i>	<i>farewell, forever farewell!</i>

(Rosalía de Castro, *Cantares Gallegos* 15)

In the poem from which this extract was taken, Rosalía de Castro bids farewell to Padrón (Galicia) before emigrating to Castilla. Her goodbye is sad and gloomy; full of that *morriña* ('melancholy') that is so much ingrained in the Galician character.

My words here also constitute a farewell – although stemming from a completely different frame of mind, as I am unashamedly happy to say *adiós para sempre, adiós* to the work contained in the following pages. However, like Rosalía, before emigrating to new research projects I would like to acknowledge those who, directly or indirectly, helped me through the writing of my PhD thesis and its subsequent adaptation into a research monograph.

First and foremost, I owe enormous thanks to Sylvia Adamson. She is, and always will be, my point of reference. Her generosity while I was her research student, and her help in all things linguistic and personal afterwards have been invaluable. What more can I say except that, without her, this book would have never happened.

I would also like to go back in time to acknowledge those who elicited my interest in historical linguistics and guided, advised, and encouraged me all the way: Javier Pérez-Guerra, Dolores González-Alvarez, Eduardo Varela and David Denison. I still fondly remember Eduardo's live declamation of bits of Beowulf during his Old English classes and the *landwige sandwich* sessions on Tuesdays afternoons in Manchester.

Moving now from past to present, thanks also go to my colleagues of the School of English at the University of Liverpool, in particular to the School's Research Committee for having granted me a period of research leave during which this book got its final shape. In this shaping process, the expert comments of Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Teresa Fanego-Lema, Belén Méndez-Naya, Susan Pintzuk, Terttu Nevalainen and, above all, Olga Fischer, proved invaluable. Similarly, Chris Routledge and Anke de Looper duly deserve a mention for their care in making this manuscript tidy.

Last but not least, *muchas gracias* are due to my family and friends for supporting me during my particular *longa noite de pedra*. Anita, Nuria, Ana, Filomena, Paulo, Claire and especially Iria were always there for me. I have had many a laugh and quite a number of good nights in and out with the Carnatic Crew (Thomasz, Phil, Ji, John, Tim and Jenny) and the Red Cross Mersey Group (Neil, Duff and Adamski). Finally, Neil Clark cannot be forgotten. It takes more than patience and good will to let me listen to *There's a light that never goes out* for thirty consecutive times without losing the will to live.

Liverpool, January 2008

Abbreviations

1. General

Ch.	Chapter
Ed.	Edition/edited
FG.	Functional Grammar
Gmc.	Germanic
LAT.	Latin
<i>MED</i>	Middle English Dictionary
OF	Old French
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
Pt.	Part

2. Grammatical

Adj.	Adjective
Adv.	Adverb
AJC	Comparative adjective
Comp.	Comparative construction
IC	Infinitival Complement
Infl.	Inflectional Comparative
MOD	Modifier
MTD	Morphological Doubling Theory
Pass.	Passive
Perip.	Periphrastic Comparative
PC	Prepositional Complement
V.	Verb

3. Historical periods

OE2	Old English 2 (850–950)
OE3	Old English 3 (950–1050)
OE4	Old English 4 (1050–1150)
HM1	Middle English 1 (1150–1250)
HM2	Middle English 2 (1250–1350)
HM3	Middle English 3 (1350–1420)
HM4	Middle English 4 (1420–1500)

EOE	Early Old English (–950)
LOE	Late Old English (950–1150)
EME	Early Middle English (1150–1350)
LME	Late Middle English (1350–1500)
EModE	Early Modern English (1500–1700)
LModE	Late Modern English (1700–1900)
PDE	Present-day English (1900–present-day)

4. Corpora

ARCHER.	<i>A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers</i>
BNC.	<i>British National Corpus</i>
CED.	<i>Corpus of English Dialogues</i>
CEEC.	<i>Corpus of Early English Correspondence</i>
CMEPV.	<i>Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse</i>
EMODD.	<i>Early Modern English Drama Corpus</i>
HEL.	<i>Helsinki Corpus</i>
LAMP.	<i>Lampeter Corpus</i>
LMODE.	<i>Late Modern English Fiction Corpus</i>
PPCME2.	<i>Penn-Helsinki parsed Corpus of Middle English</i>
TOR.	<i>Toronto Corpus</i>

5. Authors

AELF.	Ælfric
AELR.	A. de Rievaulx
ANON.	Anonymous
AUST.	J. Austen
BEDE.	Bede
BOUC.	D. Boucicault
BOYL.	R. Boyle
BRINS.	J. Brinsley
CAXT.	W. Caxton
CHAU.	G. Chaucer
DEFO.	D. Defoe
DEKK.	T. Dekker
DICK.	C. Dickens
FCOR.	F. Cornwallis
FIEL.	H. Fielding
FLET.	J. Fletcher
GAY.	J. Gay
GOLD.	O. Goldsmith
GREG.	Gregory the Great
HEYW.	T. Heywood
JON.	B. Jonson

MIDD.	T. Middleton
MITC.	D. Mitchel
ROBE.	T. W. Robertson
ROW.	W. Rowley
SHAK.	W. Shakespeare
SMOL.	T. Smollett
THCK.	W. M. Thackeray
TOUR.	G. of La Tour Landy
WULF.	Wulfstan

6. Works

AB.ML.	<i>A.B's Letter of Advice Concerning Marriage</i>
AELF.HO.	<i>Catholic Homilies</i> (Ælfric)
AELF.LIV.	<i>Lives of Saints</i> (Ælfric)
AELF.ME.	<i>Memories of Saints</i> (Ælfric)
AELR.DI.	<i>De Institutione Inclusarum</i> (A. de Rievaulx's translation)
ANON. NI.	<i>Life of St. Nicholas</i> (anon.)
ANON.AW.	<i>Ancrene Wisse</i> (anon.)
ANON.BO.	OE Bounds (anon.)
ANON.EMA.	<i>England's Monarchy Asserted</i> (anon.)
ANON.HALI.	<i>Hali Meidenhad</i> (anon.)
ANON.MA.	<i>Mandeville's Travels</i> (anon.)
ANON.MR.	<i>Marianus</i> (1641, Corpus of English Dialogues, anon.)
ANON.OT.	<i>Old Testament</i> (anon.)
ANON.TK.	<i>Three Kings of Cologne</i> (Anon.)
ANON.YP.	<i>The York Plays</i> (anon.)
APUL.HB.	<i>Herbarium Apuleii</i>
AUST.MP.	<i>Mansfield Park</i> (J. Austen)
BEDE.EH.	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum</i> (Bede)
BOUC.FS.	<i>Flying Scud</i> (D. Boucicault)
BOYL.EM.	<i>Electricity and Magnetism</i> (R. Boyle)
BRINS.LL.	<i>Boethius</i> (J. Brinsley, EMode)
CAXT.MD.	<i>Le Morte Darthur</i> (W. Caxton)
CHAM.LT.	<i>Chamberlain letters</i> (Estival 1989)
CHAU.ME.	<i>Tale of Melibee</i> (G. Chaucer)
CHRD.RU.	<i>Rule of Chrodegang</i> (anon.)
CHRO.A.	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> (MsA)
CHRO.E.	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> (Peterborough Chronicle E)
CLA.WII.	Laws (II, Cnut)
DEFE.LS.	Defensor's <i>Liber Scientiarum</i>
DEFO.FM.	<i>The Fortunate Mistress</i> (D. Defoe)
DEFO.RC.	<i>Robinson Crusoe</i> (D. Defoe)
DEKK.LO.	<i>London's Tempe</i> (J. Fletcher)
DEKK.NS.	<i>The Noble Souldier</i> (T. Dekker)
DEKK.SA.	<i>Satiro-Mastix</i> (T. Dekker)

DICK.BH.	<i>Bleak House</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.DA.	<i>David Copperfield</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.GE.	<i>Great Expectations</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.LD.	<i>Little Dorrit</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.NN.	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.OC.	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.OT.	<i>Oliver Twist</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.PP.	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i> (C. Dickens)
DICK.PP.	<i>The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club</i> (C. Dickens)
EADW.CP.	<i>Eadwine's Canterbury Psalter</i>
FARM.RW.	<i>Farman's Rusworth Gospel</i>
FCOR.LET.	Letter to Lady J. Bacon (F. Cornwallis)
FIEL.AA.	<i>Amelia</i> (H. Fielding)
FIEL.JO.	<i>Jonathan Wild</i> (H. Fielding)
FIEL.TJ.	<i>Tom Jones</i> (H. Fielding)
FLET.CC.	<i>The Custome of the Countrey</i> (J. Fletcher)
FLET.ML.	<i>The Mad Lover</i> (J. Fletcher)
FLET.TH.	<i>Thierry and Theodoret</i> (J. Fletcher & P. Massinger)
FLET.WP.	<i>Women Pleas'd</i> (J. Fletcher)
GAY.MH.	<i>The Mohocks</i> (J. Gay)
GOLD.GM.	<i>The Good Natur'd Man</i> (O. Goldsmith)
GREG. BO.	<i>Boethius</i> (Gregory the Great)
GREG.CP.	<i>Cura Pastoralis</i> (Gregory the Great)
GREG.D.	<i>Dialogues</i> (Gregory the Great)
GREG.OR.	<i>Orosius</i> (Gregory the Great)
HAMI.	Hamilton 1778
HEYW.MW.	<i>The Fair Maid of the West</i> (T. Heywood)
JON.EM.	<i>Every Man out of his Humour</i> (B. Jonson)
MESS.LET.	Jane Messyndyne's letters (CEEC)
MIDD.FG.	<i>Your Fiue Gallants</i> (T. Middleton)
MIDD.IN.	<i>An Invention</i> (T. Middleton)
MIDD.VA.	<i>The Nice Valour</i> (T. Middleton)
MIDD/ROW.WTT.	<i>The World Tost at Tennis</i> (T. Middleton and W. Rowley)
MITC.AY.	<i>Ayenbite of Inwyt</i> (D. Mitchel)
ROBE.CA.	<i>Caste. An Original Comedy.</i> (T. W. Robertson)
SHAK.2H4.	<i>King Henry IV</i> (part 2) (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.AC.	<i>Anthony and Cleopatra</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.AW.	<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.AYL.	<i>As You Like It</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.CO.	<i>Coriolanus</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.H5.	<i>King Henry V</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.H8.	<i>King Henry VIII</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.HA.	<i>Hamlet, Prince of Denmark</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.JC.	<i>Julius Caesar</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.KJ.	<i>King John</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.KL.	<i>King Lear</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.LLL.	<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.MM.	<i>Measure for Measure</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.MN.	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> (W. Shakespeare)

SHAK.MV.	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.OH.	<i>Othello</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.TA.	<i>Timon of Athens</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.TC.	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.TE.	<i>The Tempest</i> (W. Shakespeare)
SHAK.TNK.	<i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> (W. Shakespeare & J. Fletcher)
SMOL.LA.	<i>The Life and Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves</i> (T. Smollett)
SMOL.RO.	<i>Roderick Random</i> (T. Smollett)
THCK.BA.	<i>The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon</i> (W. M. Thackeray)
TOUR.KN.	<i>Book of the Knight of La Tour Landy</i> (G. of La Tour Landy)
WMS.MD.	<i>Le Morte Darthur</i> (Winchester Ms)
WULF.PO.	<i>Institutes of Polity</i> (Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester)
WULF.HO.	<i>Homilies</i> (Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester)

Introduction

1. Three 'strands' in the study of English adjective comparison

1.1 Standard grammars of English

The following passage illustrates the standard account of English adjective comparison:

Comparison in relation to a higher degree is expressed by the inflected forms in *-er* (...) or their periphrastic equivalents with *more* (...):

Anna is {*cleverer/more clever*} than Susan (...)

The choice between inflectional and periphrastic comparison is largely determined by the length of the adjective.

a. Monosyllabic adjectives normally form their comparison by inflection:

low ~ *lower* ~ *lowest* (...)

b. Many disyllabic adjectives can also take inflections, though they have the alternative of the periphrastic forms:

Her children are politer/more polite
(the) politest, (the) most polite
(...)

c. Trisyllabic or longer adjectives can only take periphrastic forms:

beautiful ~ *more beautiful* [BUT NOT: **beautifuller*] (...)

d. Participle forms which are used as adjectives regularly take only periphrastic forms:

interesting ~ *more interesting* ~ *most interesting* (...)

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 followed by a *than* clause:

John is *more mad* than Bob is

(Quirk et al. 1985:458, 461–463)

The passage features a general description of how the different comparative types (inflectional – *friendlier*; periphrastic – *more friendly*) are formed, followed by a report of the factor(s) that govern the selection of one or the other strategy (note that a morphological factor, i.e. the length of the adjective, is considered the main determinant in the choice of comparative strategy).¹ Similar descriptive accounts of comparison were offered in the grammars of the early twentieth century (e.g. Jespersen 1909–1949; Poutsma 1914; Curme 1931). While accurate, these analyses are perhaps too general to be taken as more than a good starting point for a study of how the English comparative system works. A further problem associated especially with the early twentieth-century grammars is that they are based on the intuitions and/or the selective (and often limited) textual choice of the linguist. Some of these issues are addressed by more recent grammars of English. For instance, Biber et al. (1999) is not only a corpus-based work, but also – probably because of its corpus-based nature – it acknowledges the existence of double comparative constructions (e.g. *worser*, *more lovelier*). However, grammars are broad in terms of the number of the topics they cover, which in its turn precludes the possibility of an in-depth treatment of the nature of comparative constructions.

1.2 Formal approaches to adjective comparison

Scholarly interest in comparative constructions grew in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in works couched within the generative tradition. From a syntactic point of view, these generative studies were mainly devoted (a) to determining the transformations undergone by comparatives from deep to surface structure and finding a suitable way of representing them in phrase markers, (b) to ascertaining whether comparatives are derived from one or two base strings (Huddleston 1967; Campbell & Wales 1969) and (c) to analysing the syntactic status of the particle *than* (Hankamer 1973). With respect to semantics, their research focused on the relation between positive and comparative adjectives,² the general meaning of the comparative construction (Cresswell 1976; Klein 1980, 1982; Hellan 1981; von Stechow 1984) and the polarity of the particle *than* (Joly 1967; Mittwoch 1974; Napoli & Nespor 1976; Hoeksema 1983).

I observed above that the account of comparison provided by the grammars of the early twentieth century was not completely satisfactory because of the gen-

1. Huddleston & Pullum (2002:1582–1584) offer a very similar view to the one reproduced above.

2. Some scholars considered positive adjectives the source of comparative constructions (Stassen 1984); whereas other linguists claimed that comparatives were the primary adjectival structures and therefore, that positive adjectives had to be interpreted against the comparative degree (Bartsch & Vennemann 1972; Gnutzmann, Ilson & Webster 1973).

eralised nature of their statements. The opposite shortcoming may be attributed to these generative studies: although they constitute a valuable contribution to the field, they focus on very specific aspects of comparison that can only marginally lead us to a better understanding of the functioning and the characteristics of the system as a whole. Moreover, they adopt a sentence-based, introspective approach which, as previous literature suggests (cf. for instance Noël 2003), is controversial on two counts: firstly, the examples are deprived of a context, which is often an essential factor for the correct interpretation of the linguistic structure under consideration. Secondly, de-contextualised, made-up data may be easily manipulated to suit the claims of the researcher. With this, of course, I am not implying that formally-oriented linguistics systematically avoids the analysis of data (cf. among others, Kroch & Taylor 2000; Haeberli 2000; Pintzuk 2002; Pintzuk 2005) – although, to the best of my knowledge, no corpus-based formalist study on adjective comparison has been carried out.

1.3 Corpus linguistics and adjective comparison

The third approach to the study of comparison that I would like to deal with here is corpus linguistics. The first modern corpus of texts was the *Survey of English Usage* (compiled in the 1960s). However, the possibilities offered by computers soon brought about the development of the first electronic corpora, namely, the *Brown University Corpus* (1964), the *Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus* (1978) and the *London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English* (the electronic version of the *Survey of English Usage*, 1980). The use of computerised corpora as a research tool became a very productive practice at the end of the 1980s (when the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* was completed) and, as a result, the production of electronic corpora both synchronic and diachronic notably increased in the following decades – e.g. the *Lampeter Corpus of Early English Tracts* (1991), the *British National Corpus* (1992) the ARCHER (1993) and the *Corpus of English Dialogues* (2006; see Section 2.2 below for a brief description of each of these corpora). The availability of larger quantitative data represented by these electronic corpora drew scholars' attention to issues that either had not been studied before or that, having been studied, had not produced the expected results due to lack of statistically significant amounts of empirical support; among them, the suggestion that English is shifting towards being an analytic (as opposed to synthetic) language (e.g. Potter 1969: 146–147; cf. also Barber 1993: 274).³ The analysis-synthesis debate, in its turn, led to a greater interest in comparative constructions, for scholars considered

3. See Vincent (1997) for a critique of the (widespread) tendency to apply the labels analytic/synthetic to languages in general (cf. also Ch. 2, Section 6 below).

that the overall tendency of the language would be reflected in the distribution of the inflectional and periphrastic forms in comparative adjectives – note, in this connection, Strang’s (1970: 58) observation about the “lack [of] precise numerical information” about the distribution of PDE inflectional and periphrastic comparative structures.

Brook (1973: 180) observed that “comparison of adjectives with *more* and *most* is gaining on the use of *-er* and *-est*”. A similar statement can be found in Barber (1964: 131, 1997: 146–147). Barber also suggested that the analytic tendency in adjectives can nowadays be clearly appreciated “in a group of disyllabic adjectives (like *cloudy*, *common*, *cruel*, *pleasant*, *quiet*, *simple*) which a few years ago were normally compared with *-er/-est*, but which are now usually compared with *more/most*” (Barber 1997: 146, see also 1993: 274). Brook’s (1973) and Barber’s (1993, 1997) intuitive impressions were, to a certain extent, supported by Bauer’s (1994) analysis of (a number of) disyllabic adjectives in Present-day British and American newspapers. Bauer’s study reveals “a tendency for periphrastic comparison to be used later in the century than the suffixed comparison” (1994: 54), especially with disyllabic adjectives ending in *-ly*. Nevertheless, he does not interpret the tendency towards analyticity in disyllabic comparatives as a structural shift, but as the result of the gradual regularisation of the comparative system in disyllabic adjectives (Bauer 1994: 58). More recently, Denison has reported that “the general tendency over the recorded history of English has been for syntactic [i.e. periphrastic] comparison to expand at the expense of morphological [i.e. inflectional] comparison” (1998: 128). However, Denison’s (1998) own corpus analysis of superlative constructions in the ARCHER corpus (1675–1900) does not seem to support the (supposed) drift of forms towards periphrastic parameters, as it shows that there is “no any clear frequency change” between inflectional/periphrastic superlative constructions in LModE (ibid.). A stronger challenge to the (supposed) analytic drift of English is represented by the diachronic corpus-based studies of comparison carried out by Kytö (1996) and Kytö & Romaine (1997). These works chart the distribution of inflectional and periphrastic comparatives in British English from LME to PDE, showing that it is in fact the inflectional rather than the periphrastic mode of comparison that has been on the increase in the Modern period. Kytö & Romaine (2000) offers a contrastive study of the distributional tendencies of comparative forms from the wider perspective of both British and American English throughout the modern and present-day periods, arriving at the same conclusion.

The other corpus-based studies of comparison deal almost exclusively with syntactic matters: Leech & Culpeper (1997), Lindquist (2000), Mondorf (2002) and Suematsu (2004) concentrate on an analysis of the syntactic features that determine (or, at least, favour) the deployment of inflectional vs. periphrastic forms in simple adjectival forms in LModE and PDE, while Mondorf (2000) investigates

the choice of comparison in PDE adjectival compounds. The only exception to this trend is Mondorf (2003, 2007), which explores some cognitive and semantic determinants of comparative variation.

One may argue that these corpus-based studies are more comprehensive than the accounts of comparison mentioned above (i.e. standard grammars and formalist works) in that their results are backed up by an analysis of a representative amount of (contextualised) data. There is nonetheless still room for further research. For instance, Kytö (1996) spearheads the use of computerised corpora in the study of adjective comparison, showing that in LME and EModE (simple) inflectional comparatives are generally more frequent than the periphrastic ones and that “the inflectional uses thrive in matter-of-fact text types such as handbooks and language written to reflect spoken or colloquial registers” (Kytö 1996:130). However, the historical, linguistic or social reasons underlying the preference for inflectional over periphrastic forms in the period as a whole, why periphrastic comparatives are dispreferred in “colloquial registers”⁴ or whether there is any interconnection between these two facts (i.e. the increase of inflectional forms and their being preferred in colloquial environments) do not receive much attention. Similarly, Lindquist (2000) presents his work as a follow-up study of Leech & Culpeper (1997), concentrating on the distribution of comparative strategies for *-ly* adjectives. His contribution tests against the data the same syntactic factors examined by Leech & Culpeper’s (1997) study (which already included a number of *-ly* disyllabic adjectival types) and confirms their results; however, it does not fully explain why the presence of those syntactic factors (e.g. adverbial intensifiers/presence of a second term of comparison) would skew the results towards one or the other comparative strategy.

A noticeable shortcoming of the corpus-based approach to comparison is that, with the exception of Kytö (1996), Kytö & Romaine (1997) and Suematsu (2004) all the studies that have appeared to date are synchronically oriented. The preference for this kind of research may to a certain extent be understood in the light of the larger amount and greater availability of synchronic data (in both spoken and written media) and the fact that detecting syntactic correlates of (synchronic) variation is relatively straightforward. At any rate, diachronic and non-syntactic synchronic research questions on the comparative degree remain largely unexplored.

With regard to the diachronic study of comparison, it is interesting to observe that the *Cambridge history of the English language* (1992–1999) – currently considered the standard work of reference for the study of the history of English – devotes very little space to comparative constructions. In fact, if their treatment of

4. See Biber et al.’s (1999:521–525) corpus-based grammar for some comments on the distribution of the comparative modes across registers in PDE.

comparative forms is collectively considered, the overall view of its development is rather patchy. Traugott (1992:262–264) discusses the morphological and syntactic characteristics of comparative clauses in Old English (henceforth OE). Lass (1992:116, 1999:155–156, 158) and Denison (1998:128) comment on the historical establishment of the length of the adjective as the rule for the selection of comparative strategy as well as linking the disappearance of double comparative forms to the prescriptivist attitudes of eighteenth century grammarians.⁵ Finally, Adamson (1998:552) briefly refers to the stylistic use of double comparative forms in the Renaissance.

Concerning double comparatives (e.g. *more better*, *worser*) Adamson's (1998) remarks are an exception to the overall tendency, in studies on comparison, to ignore them. At most, they are mentioned in passing in the grammars of English (see, for instance Curme 1931:503 or, more recently, Biber et al. 1999:525). No reference to double forms is found in any of the formal studies mentioned above.⁶ As for the corpus-based works, both Kytö (1996:124) and Kytö & Romaine (1997:331, 2000:173) explicitly acknowledge the existence of this third mode of comparison, and indeed some double comparatives are attested in their data. However, neither they nor subsequent (corpus-based) scholarship investigates any aspect of the use of double forms – probably, as Kytö & Romaine (1997:337) suggest, due to their (relative) infrequency in the corpora.

2. Adjective comparison: A synchronic and diachronic account

The present work intends to contribute to a better understanding of the English system of degree by means of a study of a number of aspects of the evolution of adjective comparison that have either been considered controversial or not been accounted for in previous literature. My main interest is thus, diachronic. Nevertheless, as will be shown in the following chapters, the diachronic aspects analysed will also have synchronic implications. Furthermore, unlike previous synchronic and diachronic accounts of adjective comparison, the present work does not concentrate on the 'standard' comparative strategies (i.e. inflectional and periphrastic forms) only but also deals with double periphrastic comparatives, thus providing an analysis of the whole range of comparative structures.

5. Note also Denison's (1998) comment on the distribution of inflectional and periphrastic forms in LModE mentioned above.

6. One may suppose that formal linguists would justify their exclusion of double forms by pointing to the fact that they are only interested in the study of well-formed sentences. Obviously, sentences showing 'ungrammatical' forms such as double comparatives cannot but be considered deviant structures, and therefore, unsuitable for their investigation.

2.1 Theoretical stance

Without committing to any particular model, the theoretical stance that will be adopted in this book is a broadly functional one (cf. Van Valin 2003:329 for a summary of different functional approaches to the study of language).

Firstly, I observed above that, although I will consider synchronic issues, the main concern of this work is the *evolution* of comparative constructions. And it is in functional approaches that diachrony plays a key role in explaining language change (Nettle 1999:447). As Mithun (2005 [2003]:553) puts it, in functional approaches to language, “synchronic systems are understood as historical products of sequences of individual events.” In connection to this, one should also pay attention to the fact that, while “formal theory is not interested in the *actual behaviour* of speakers but only in the general properties of the *language use of the individual speaker in ideal situations*” (Fischer 2007:55), functional approaches make performance the central focus of their investigation.

Secondly, against formal frameworks, functionalism rejects the idea that syntax is a self-contained component of grammar (Anderson 1999:111; Croft 1995:491). Functionalism postulates that language is an instrument of social interaction (Dik 1989:3) and as such, that its structure and organisation is determined “by the communicative and interactional functions which it serves, and the full cognitive, social and psychological properties of the human user” (Thompson 1992:37; cf. also Mithun 2005 [2003]:552; Van Valin 2003:336). In other words, functional approaches reject the idea that change is driven by language-internal structural factors only and advocate a model where language-external considerations (i.e. social or cultural changes) are also accommodated (Newmeyer 1999:470–471; Mithun 2005 [2003]:552).⁷ Moreover, to a functionalist, language-internal factors are not restricted to considerations of structure but also include cognitive/semantic factors (e.g. desire for expressiveness, maintenance or development of iconicity, avoidance of ambiguity).

Further precision should be added at this point. In their jointly edited volume *Determinants of grammatical variation in English*, Rohdenburg and Mondorf (2003:1) claim that scholars working within the functional paradigm have traditionally focused on semantically-motivated functional differences. They (Rohdenburg & Mondorf 2003:1) however, argue for a broader approach to studying form/function variation, where not only semantic but also “major extragrammatical and largely neglected factors determining grammatical variation” should

7. It should be emphasized again that not all formal approaches reject the interplay of internal and external factors in processes of language change. Pintzuk (2005:525), for instance, admits their interaction between external and internal motivations of change – although she seems to advocate the prevalence of the internal factors over the external ones.

be taken into consideration (2003: 1). These “neglected” determinants are phonological (preference for alternating syllable structure and avoidance of stress clashes, Schlüter 2003), cognitive (processing efficiency, Hawkins 2003), discursive (Nöel 2003), socio-stylistic (genre and level of formality, Mair 2003), dialectal (Siemund 2003) and frequency factors (Krug 2003).

In line with the views put forward above, in this book I shall be arguing that the grammatical variation found in adjective comparison of superiority is to a great extent motivated by differences in the function performed by each of the variants (i.e. inflectional, periphrastic and double comparatives), these differences being best appreciated through the analysis of the context in which the comparative forms occur. Furthermore, I will examine comparative constructions in the light of “more traditional” functional notions and ideas such as iconicity (Ch. 8, Section 4), informativeness (see Ch. 4, Section 5.4.1), avoidance of ambiguity/need for clarity (in the conveyance of degree; see Ch. 2, Section 6) and increase of (comparative) expressiveness (see Ch. 6, Section 3). At the same time, the following chapters bring into play a number of the “new” determinants of variation also considered in Rohdenburg & Mondorf (2003); namely, the (possible) influence of frequency factors in the establishment of periphrastic comparatives (see Ch. 2, Section 3); the importance of the discourse situation in (a) determining the semantic type to which inflectional and periphrastic forms conform (see Ch. 5, Section 4) and (b) describing the different stages of the evolution of simple and double comparatives (see Ch. 4, Ch. 5, Ch. 6 and Ch. 7) and the need for a detailed analysis of the socio-stylistic characteristics of double periphrastic forms in order to obtain an accurate picture of their historical development (see Ch. 8, Section 5). In this respect, recent literature suggests that, although from the second half of the twentieth century onwards extra-linguistic aspects have been considered alongside intra-linguistic factors as cause of change, language contact “still seems to be given second place behind internal motivation” (Farrar & Jones 2002: 1).⁸ As will be shown below, language contact and its impact on the evolution of comparison will be a prominently discussed issue in Ch. 2 and Ch. 3 below.

A final word on the interface between language acquisition and language change. Formalist approaches to language tend to reject the possibility of a separate theory of language change (Pintzuk 2005: 511). They maintain that language acquisition during childhood is the locus for language change, which is defined as change in “parameter setting (...) manifested by a cluster of simultaneous surface changes” (Lightfoot 2005 [2003]: 496). Surface changes may of course involve gradual shifts; however, grammar change (which involves parameter changing) is

8. Note, however, that it is not always on “easy to make a distinction between internal (intra-linguistic) and external (extra-linguistic) causes in each case of change” (Fischer 2007: 35).