

## Aportaciones sociolingüísticas al desarrollo de la forma analítica del grado comparativo y superlativo en inglés: 1420-1710

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### I. COMPARISON IN ENGLISH: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In Old English, the comparative and superlative system for adjectives was almost wholly inflectional (-ra/-ost from the Germanic suffixes \*/iz/ and \*/oz/) because it was a highly inflected member of the West Germanic language group. As a result of the Viking wars and the subsequent settlement of native speakers of Old Norse, the introduction of new words and a simplification of the grammar started to take place. Due to the influence of French and Latin, some changes started to take place in Middle English.

In the 20th century, some controversies arose regarding the origins of the periphrastic forms; in González-Díaz's (2008: 15) words: a 'chronological' and a 'philological' controversy, which have to do with the beginning of periphrastic forms and whether periphrastic constructions appeared as a result of internal changes or due to language contact. Mustanoja (1960) stated that the reluctant attitudes towards the use of a periphrastic mode of comparison in English dialects might suggest that this was not present in the original repertoire of English linguistic structures, and, probably, these forms gained ground as a result of the influence of French during the 13th and 14th centuries, by analogy with French periphrastic constructions like *plus miser sim*, i.e. 'I am more miserable' (see Danchev 1989: 170, 172-173).

By contrast, other scholars point that English periphrastic forms come from a native development (Mitchell 1985, from González-Díaz 2008:16). Despite these claims, some Old English grammars do not deal with the analytic form of adjectives for the comparative; such is the case of Quirk and Wrenn (1955) who only mention the synthetic form of adjective comparison in Old English: "The comparative ends in -ra and is declined on the definite pattern; the superlative ends in -ost(a), -(e)st (a) and is also declined on the definite pattern except often for the n.sg.masc and fem. and n.a.sg. neut." (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 34).

Thanks to the flourishing of computerised corpora, the interest in this phenomenon re-emerged in a number of studies on adjective comparison (Kytö 1996, Kytö & Romaine 1997,2000, Lindquist 2000). Nevertheless, the controversial nature of this issue was still present in some research studies. Those by Kytö (1996), Kytö and Romaine (1997) and Kytö and Romaine (2000) are pivotal for the issue of periphrastic forms as a native resource. Moreover, as González-Díaz asserts, there are some ambiguous comments that reflect the controversial nature of this topic of research:

The periphrastic construction first appeared in the thirteenth century, more probably under Latin than French influence. At the same time, the construction seems to have been of native origin and arisen from the need for emphasis and clarity felt by the speakers.

Kytö (1996: 123)

Previous research on this issue was just based on hypotheses, and more recent investigation is of a corpus-based nature, although the latest work either does not seem to reach a clear conclusion about this or fall back on the same claims made by previous authors. Therefore, as a result of the lack of consensus on previous studies and a need for further scrutiny, González-Díaz (2008: 20-34) investigated the beginnings of periphrastic comparison and the establishment of '*more + adj*' as the standard form for it in the *Helsinki Corpus*. She states that English periphrastic comparison was already available in the 9th century, after examining the collocation of the adverbs *swiðor*, *ma* and *bet* with participial constructions.

Moreover, González-Díaz has found that the development from participles to adjectives had already started in the second part of Old English. Not only did they occur in vernacular texts, but also in Old English translations from Latin original texts, despite the fact that she affirms that they are, without any doubt, an ultimately native construction. In addition to the origin, it is unclear the reason why this new periphrastic forms developed, since inflectional forms were already present.

It was not until the last part of the Middle English period that periphrastic constructions settled in the English language as a standard comparative option (Kytö & Romaine 1997). Some scholars have pointed to phonological and morphological factors as the reasons for the difference in distribution and use between inflectional and periphrastic comparative forms. Quirk *et al* (1985:461-462) pinpoint that the choice between inflectional and periphrastic constructions is determined by the length of the adjective: monosyllabic adjectives take the inflectional form except for *real*, *right*, *wrong* and the preposition *like* which form the comparative with the periphrastic construction. Disyllabic adjectives are said to take inflections, although there are some that take the alternative of the periphrastic form, such as *polite*.

### III. OBJECTIVES

The current study explores developmental processes of synthetic and analytic mechanisms in English. Our aim is to account for the origins of periphrastic forms of comparison: was the use of the periphrastic form a native resource and not a new form that entered in the adjective comparative system due to the influence of external factors? and under what social conditions is the use of periphrastic forms preferred? The answer to these research questions would shed some light on the sociolinguist evolution of the comparative and the superlative patterns used during the last part of the Middle English and the Early Modern English periods, as well as to elucidate the origins and development of the new periphrastic form of adjectives.

This study covers a period of approximately 300 years (1420-1710) and the primary source is the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*. This computerised corpus contains a number of texts of different genres and styles (medicine, religious, law, science, private correspondence, etc.) and written with different purposes. Additionally, the subdivision of each period into different sub-periods enables a diachronic study.

### IV. RESULT AND INTERPRETATION

Longitudinally, regarding **monosyllabic** adjectives of both the comparative and superlative forms, the results shape a clear progression towards innovation in the use of the

periphrastic forms during the MEIV and EModEI. It is in MEIV when the periphrastic form of adjectives is most widely used in comparison with the rest of the sub-periods: 8.30% in comparative adjectives and 18.2% in superlative adjectives. However, this progression declines in EModEII and EModEIII, since a further increase of inflectional adjectives appeared mainly due to the influence of the prescriptive tendencies from around 1570 to 1710. In contrast to this, an analysis of **disyllabic** adjectives from the chosen periods reveals predominance in the use of the periphrastic type of comparison. In the first sub-period, 87% and 77.8% of all disyllabic adjectives were compared periphrastically for comparatives and superlatives respectively. However, as we reach the two last sub-periods, an increase in the use of disyllabic adjectives with inflections appeared. As we said above, this change is due to the consolidation of the process of standardization, reinforced during the last part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As far as **polysyllabic** adjectives are concerned, the use of inflections, periphrasis or double forms shows a similar development in the first period, as most of the adjectives were compared periphrastically and just a tiny number were examples for inflectional and double forms. Periphrastic forms highly outnumbered the inflectional ones, above all in the last sub-period. However, as far as the comparative form is concerned, in MEIV and EModEII, 3.8% and 6.8% of polysyllabic adjectives respectively, were formed by inflection. The same is noted for the superlative forms, since it was in those periods were the use of inflection for polysyllabic superlatives was higher than in the rest; almost 7.7 % and 12.9% of polysyllabic adjectives were compared by inflection in the case of the superlative in MEIV and EModEII respectively.

Having contrasted the quantitative and qualitative analysis carried out in this study, we assume that the periphrastic form was new during the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and all over the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some authors, such as González-Díaz (2008: 49), suggest that the periphrastic form was not a new resource influenced by the use of Latin and French in the British Isles during Middle English, as she claims that: “periphrastic comparatives appeared around the second half of the ninth century, initially as a result of the combination participles with the adverbial intensifiers *swiðor*, *ma* and *bet*”. So, was it actually a native development or was it a borrowing from Latin and French? According to Hickey (2012),

The actuation of change must be triggered by external factors. If change were purely internal and determined by preferred structural properties of language or developmental tendencies (to establish these properties), it would be difficult to account for why certain internally - motivated changes take place when they do and not at other times and in other languages.

*Hickey (2012: 394-395)*

It could be argued that the tendency of Middle English towards analyticity may have contributed to the spread of periphrastic adjectival forms by the influence of Latin and French during this period. The analytic mechanisms of the ME regular periphrastic structure in comparisons –based on the use of prepositions and a fixed word order–gain ground to the detriment of the autochthonous Anglo-Saxon synthetic mechanisms of the OE redundant inflectional structure in comparisons –based on case endings.

As for the results obtained in the **text types section**, we can appreciate a higher use of periphrastic forms of the comparative adjective in more formal texts. For example, the use of periphrastic adjectives in sermons ousted the inflectional forms during MEIV and EModEI. In MEIV 57.1% of the total numbers of superlative adjectives were periphrastic. In EModEI, 62.5% of the comparatives were used periphrastically and 75% in the superlative group. Moreover, it is important to remark that the higher rates for periphrastic constructions were found in translation of texts from French and Latin. It goes without saying that this supports the discussion analysed above in section V.5. It was in EModEI when we can appreciate how periphrastic forms of adjectives ousted the inflectional ones, either for the comparative and superlative groups: 52.8% were periphrastic in the comparative group and 62.5% in the superlative group. Moreover, it is in this sub-period when we find more uses of double forms (60%). However, we cannot appreciate this pattern in the following sub-periods. In general terms, we can say that in more informal texts the use of inflectional forms was more frequent, although we can see that during EModEI, in travelogue texts there was a higher use of periphrastic and double forms as for the comparative and superlative groups: 52.8% were periphrastic in the comparative group and 62.5% were also periphrastic in the superlative group. This may reflect an interest in climbing the social ladder by people from the lower classes and informal genres, since it seemed that they imitated the speech and writing of people in a higher social position.

As for the results obtained in the analysis of **sociolinguist parameters**, there is a higher use of periphrastic forms in EModEI and EModEII in formal texts, although we can also see an increase of them in the informal group due to the social downgrading of the periphrastic use of adjectives during that period. Moreover, the use of double forms was more frequent in texts from the formal group. Regarding sex and age, males between 40 and 60 used periphrastic forms and double forms more frequently in almost every period, becoming noticeable in the last period. Periphrastic forms were not a salient feature in the writings of males that were 60 or more. This mirrors the use of the innovative forms in the writing of males between their forties and sixties.

With respect to social rank of author, periphrastic forms were outstanding in the texts from authors that were moving to professional ranks above all in the Early Modern English sub-periods. Thus, professional people participated in the diffusion of the periphrastic form of adjective comparison.

## V. CONCLUSION

The analysis concerning the division of all occurrences into mono-, di- and polysyllabic adjectives and further into inflectional, periphrastic and double forms makes obvious the steady adaptation to the regularized grammar system reinforced at the end of the EModE period by prescriptive tendencies. This mirrors how periphrastic forms were being adapted to more polysyllabic environments, since during MEIV, periphrastic forms were more widely used instead of inflectional forms in monosyllabic adjectives, but this situation gradually changed as we get closer to the EModEIII. Furthermore, it was noted how inflectional forms were better used than periphrastic ones. This reflects the “confused situation” (Barber 1993: 60) which arose after the introduction of the new analytical way for comparing adjectives. Free variation was not the main factor when it comes to using periphrastic forms of comparison in the last part of the Middle English and the beginning of the Early Modern English period. More possible reasons for the use of periphrastic instead

of inflectional in monosyllabic environments were “stylistic factors such as speakers’ needs for emphasis and clarity” (Kytö & Romaine 1997: 330). Therefore, the use of these forms was not fixed and clear after their introduction in the English comparative system. As Kytö & Romaine suggested (1997):

After an initial spurt in the use of the new periphrastic type of comparison in some environments, the newer forms eventually oust the older ones completely. In other environments, however, the newer forms recede in favor of the older inflectional type.

Kytö & Romaine (1997: 330-331)

EModEI is seen as the period of experimenting, which resulted in what is considered nowadays as uncommon patterns of comparatives and superlatives. EModEII was quite crucial since here the formation patterns had already been established, thanks to the prescriptive tendencies. Only a tiny number of uncommon comparative constructions could be spotted. Not only has this study allowed us to trace the development of the periphrastic constructions in English but also to find out the environments in which they were more frequent. During its introduction into the English system, they were more frequent in texts from western and southern dialects, and therefore they expanded to the rest of the dialects. Moreover, translations from French and Latin and formal texts show that periphrastic forms were more recurrent. They were also more frequent in the writings from male between forty and sixty years old and in the writings from professional people. This suggests that the use of periphrastic forms for the comparative and superlative degree of adjectives was a typical *change from above* in sociolinguistic terms: they first appeared in more formal environments to afterwards expand to less formal ones. Therefore, it was a top-down process in which periphrastic forms gradually experimented a social downgrading.

So, after contrasting the results for inflectional and periphrastic use of adjectives, and taking into consideration that inflectional forms did not undergo a pattern of change as periphrastic constructions, we would conclude that according to our results periphrastic forms were introduced into the English comparative adjective system as a new form for comparing adjectives, constituting an unnatural change triggered by exogenous factors.

## VI. REFERENCES

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