A more experimental investigation of English adjective gradation
Nathan LaFave, New York University

Adjective gradation (AG), the creation of morphological or periphrastic forms of comparatives, is a well-known linguistic phenomenon that nevertheless is far from being fully understood. This paper represents one of the first experimental endeavors to determine the linguistic and social factors influencing native English speakers' preferences for forms of comparatives (see also Adams' (2011) pilot, though he addresses different research questions).

English AG takes one of two different morphosyntactic forms. The synthetic (or morphological) form involves adding -er to the root adjective to produce the comparative (e.g., smarter). Analytic (or periphrastic) forms are generated with more preceding the adjective (more honest). Certain adjectives take either synthetic or analytic form, though many exhibit variation. The literature reveals many phonological features that influence comparatives' form: the number of syllables in the root (Quirk et al. 1985), whether it has final stress (Leech & Culpeper 1997), whether there is initial stress on the right collocate (the word immediately following the graded adjective) (Mondorf 2009), and the phonological properties of the final element (Hilpert 2008). We aim to quantify impressionistic data on a subset of these factors--final segment (vowel, singleton, consonant cluster), syllablecount (monosyllable, disyllable), location of root stress--influencing English AG for comparatives through a rating study. Additional linguistic factors examined include frequency (a log-transformation of the root's raw frequency in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008-)) and the adjective's sourcelanguage (Latinate, NonLatinate). Social factors include agegroup (Young [19-29], Middle [30-49], Old [50-66]), sex, ethnicity, and acquisition or study of a NonEnglish language.

Native English speakers (n=101) rated the naturalness of 57 graded adjectives in determiner phrases (the vaster sea) using a scale of one ("very bad") to seven ("excellent"). The effects of the aforementioned factors were tested in a mixed-effects regression model, with rating as a dependent variable, fitted in R (R Development Core Team 2011). The significant factors influencing AG form were form (Est = .96, SE = .24, t = 4.01, p < .001), the interaction form:yllablecount (Est = 2.67, SE = .36, t = 7.40, p < .001), form:sourcelanguage (Est = 2.83, SE = 1.32, t = 2.13, p < .05), and the three-way interactions form:yllablecount:NonEnglish (Est = -.94, SE = .21, t = -4.46, p < .001) and form:yllablecount:agegroup (Est = .96, SE = .20, t = -3.20, p < .001).

The central findings are that (i) analytic forms were rated significantly higher on average than synthetic forms; (ii) monosyllables prefer synthetic and disyllables prefer analytic form; (iii) Latinate roots prefer analytic form, while NonLatinate (primarily Germanic) roots prefer synthetic; (iv) participants with exposure to NonEnglish languages show a larger disparity in ratings of analytic and synthetic disyllables and monosyllables than true monolinguals; and (v) as age increases, participants exhibit both a larger disparity in ratings of analytic and synthetic disyllables, and higher ratings for monosyllables overall. (i) and (ii) support previous corpus research (LaFave and Guy 2011), while (iii) and (iv) illuminate underrepresented theoretical areas in the literature. The last finding (v) begs for further research as it may suggest a change in progress, with younger speakers rating separate forms of disyllables much more similarly (hence they may not overwhelmingly produce one form over the other) than older speakers.