

A corpus-based diachronic analysis of register variation in

English comparatives

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Keywords: corpus, language change, analyticization, register variation, English comparatives

Traditionally, languages in which grammatical relations are expressed by grammatical words rather than inflectional morphemes are often described as an analytic type, while those in which grammatical relationships are expressed by means of inflectional morphemes are described as a synthetic type (Whaley 1997). Drawing on the notions of “analytic” and “synthetic”, it has been mentioned that languages in the world commonly show changes from a synthetic type to a more analytic type (Haspelmath and Michaelis 2017). The general trend toward a morphologically less complex language type (i.e. analytic) also holds true of English, because English, which was once a heavily inflectional (i.e. synthetic) language in the Old English period (Hogg and Denison 2006), is now a fairly analytic language having developed a host of periphrastic expressions (McArthur 1992). The present study explores the system of comparative formation in the English language from a diachronic perspective. English comparatives are among the many other morphosyntactic contexts where “analyticization” is in progress, i.e. an ongoing shift from a synthetic type to an analytic type (e.g. from the synthetic inflectional form *fuller* to the analytic periphrastic form *more full*). In this talk, I focus on register variation in the English comparative formation system (the term “register” is used here in the same sense as in Biber and Conrad 2009). Drawing on a sample extracted from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) and the results obtained through a series of quantitative analyses, I show that English comparatives, at least as far as American English from Late Modern English times to Present-Day English times is concerned, exhibit significant variation both in the rate of development and their “register bias” (a bias between a register and a chosen comparative form). With respect to the former point (i.e. the rate of development), the present study shows, on the basis of the correlation coefficients computed by means of Kendall’s *tau*, that it is only in the register of Non-fiction Books that the analytic type (the one with periphrastic *more*) is on the increase; in the registers of Fiction and Magazine, it is actually the synthetic type (the one with inflectional *-er*) that is on the increase (note that the synthetic type is also on the increase in the register of Non-fiction Books). As for the second point (i.e. register bias), I show, by computing deviations of proportions (Gries 2008; Lijffijt and Gries 2012), that the analytic type has a stronger register bias than the synthetic type. The implication of these results is that register plays an important role in the system of comparative formation in English, and more generally, that issues of analyticization cannot be fully resolved without reference to register variation.

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