Comparative Adjectives

There are generally two ways to communicate comparative adjectives in English, the analytic comparative *more X than* and the synthetic *X-er than*. That is, prepending the word *more* before the positive form of an adjective or appending the suffix *er* to the end. Multiple studies have looked at how the linguistic properties of the positive adjective form influences speakers' choice of the analytic or synthetic form (Hilpert) or their receptivity to reading these forms (LaFave). In the present study, linguistics students collected data and identified potential social and linguistic factors that influence the willingness of listeners to accept analytic or synthetic forms of comparative adjectives. I hypothesize that the social variables we study will not be as significant an indicator as the linguistic variables.

Literature Review

Hilpert found multiple linguistic variables that affect a speaker's comparative adjective usage. Using the British National Corpus, which tagged synthetic comparatives. Analytic comparatives were found by searching for the word "more" before adjectives and hand-selecting those that represented the analytic comparative and removing those that don't. Eleven phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features were considered to find correlation between these linguistic variables and comparative adjective use. Features that exhibited strong synthetic use include the comparative-positive usage ratio of the adjective and adjectives that end in /i/ (but notably not /li/). Features that lead to strong analytic use include the greater number of syllables in the adjective and adjectives ending in /l/ or /li/. Hilpert conclude that they have found strong predictors for comparative adjective usage, and that this may be partially based on the complexity of the adjective, in the sense of the cognitive load taken on by using either the analytic or synthetic comparative. They caution against a monocausal definition, however.

LaFave found variables that affected not the speaker's usage but a hearer's acceptability to an example of usage. In two studys, participants were given examples of comparative adjective use and made to rate the naturalness of the sentence. The primary linguistic features this was compared to was the length of the adjective in syllables (mono- or disyllabic) and the etymological origin (Latinate or non-Latinate). LaFave's primary finding was that the etymological origin *does* affect the use of the synthetic or analytic form, likely because different words are borrowed at different times in the overall process of English moving from synthetic to analytic conventions.

Methods

In this study, undergraduate linguistics students gave friends and family members to give a yes/no acceptability rating to the analytic and synthetic forms of a list of comparative adjectives. Many of these surveys were carried out over the phone. Students read out an adjective in its synthetic and analytic form and instructed participants to give their rating. Participants were allowed to accept or reject each form independently, so they could have no preference on any adjectives or even dislike both the analytic and synthetic form. Also collected was the age, gender, US state, and ethnicity of the listener. A total of 16 adjectives were used, half monosyllabic and half disyllabic.

A total of 317 listeners were surveyed. Considerable age and gender variation was acquired, since each student gathered results from six people (two from each age group and then one of each gender), but the sample over-represented southern states and white people, with almost no speakers from the Western states. Totals from each demographic category are given in the table below, and below that is a list of the adjectives studied. Note that half the adjectives are monosyllabic and half disyllabic, and additionally half end in a vowel while the other half end in

consonants.

Young	104	South	164	White	253
Middle-age	109	North	80	Non-white	58
Old	104	Midwest	65		
		Other	17		
Total	317		317		311

Quiet	Free	Handsome	Fun
Young	High	Stupid	Slow
Useless	Narrow	Wet	Tiny
Angry	Straight	Red	Pointy

Results & Discussion

The most significant variation based on social factors was the region, and to a smaller degree ethnicity. Speakers in the midwest region accepted the analytic comparative slightly but significantly more than the other regions (35% vs 31%) and non-white speakers used the analytic comparative more than white speakers as well (35% vs 31%), however the sample of non-white speakers (only 18% of total participants) was so small as to make this just barely significant.

Some linguistic variables we found to affect the comparative accepted were what kind of sound the adjective ended in (consonant or vowel, the words used were half-and-half) and how many syllables the adjective had (one or two, the words used were half-and-half). Adjectives that end in consonants were significantly more likely to use the analytic comparative than those ending in vowels (40% vs 21%) and adjectives of two syllables more than those with one (40% vs 24%). These effects were stronger than the social demographics tested for, and aligned with the findings of Hilpert.

Social demographics, while their effects are less pronounced, did interact with the

linguistic features. The midwest had a significantly stronger consonant-vowel effect (48% vs 40%), while the effect is weakest in the north, even though the sample had fewer northerners and midwesterners. It is important that age did not seem to affect comparative use, since LaFave suggested the analytic is an emergent form.

A few individual words studied seemed to contradict the overall patterns and the criteria outlined by Hilpert. The adjective *free* ends in a vowel, which would make it lean towards the synthetic, and even more so since it ends in /i/, but at only 59% synthetic use it falls behind adjectives like *angry* at 86% (which ends in /ri/, rhyming with *free*) and *pointy* and *tiny* which also end in /i/ and reach 74% and 90%, respectively. This might be explained by the fact that *free* is the only adjective ending in /i/ used that is also monosyllabic. Another adjective that defied expectations was *stupid*, where the analytic lead by only 1%, even though disyllabic words that end in consonants both averaged 60% analytic use. Finally, *red* leaned only slightly towards the synthetic form despite ending in a consonant.

Conclusion

While social demographic features such as region and ethnicity had small effects on the variation between the analytic and synthetic comparative adjective acceptability, the linguistic features of syllable length and word-final sound had a greater significance. Nevertheless, the linguistic features interacted with region and ethnicity in some ways. This generally correlates with the findings of Hilpert and LaFave, who studied similar linguistic features. Our finding that adjectives with greater numbers of syllables correlated with a greater analytic use are congruous with Hilpert. Since age did not seem to affect usage, LaFave's analysis that the analytic is an emergent form was not confirmed.

In the future, this dataset could be expanded to include more variation in all social

variables, especially ethnicity and region, which could find their effects to be stronger or weaker. Explicitly requesting that students seek out this variation could correct this. Additionally, students who have taken the class more than once—which is a fine and respectable thing to do—may have acquired data from the same people each time, leading to some individuals being overrepresented in the dataset.

Works Cited

Hilpert, Martin 2008. The English comparative: Language structure and language use. *English Language and Linguistics* 12.3: 395-417.

LaFave, Nathan. 2015. The most apt experimental investigation of English comparative and superlative formation. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 21.1:1-10