

***More* and *-er* in adjectival comparatives: Examining children's preferences through a judgement task**

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the plausibility of adopting a transparency-productivity approach in explaining children's preference for one adjectival comparative form over another. A parallel was drawn between comparatives *more* and *-er* and agentives *man* and *-er* to demonstrate how the same age-directed principles of transparency and productivity motivating children to select between the two agentive forms (Clark 1981) may direct their preferences for either of the two comparative forms. The hypotheses, namely *more* will be preferred by younger children while *-er* will be preferred by their older counterparts, were confirmed with the findings from a judgement task conducted as part of a larger study (Chua 2004, Chua 2007). The plausibility of positing a role for transparency and productivity in the child comparative system will be discussed with reference to how they may impact the teaching of adjectival comparison.

Keywords: adjective, comparative, transparency, productivity, pedagogy

1. Introduction

The option of attaching *more* or *-er* to an adjective in the expression of comparison has often become so automated to any competent user of the English language that few have stopped to ponder on what is driving them or others around to choose one comparative¹ form over another. Few, that is, except grammarians who have attempted to theorise the intuitive *more* and *-er* phenomena in a number of ways. Evidence of this can be found in the detailed descriptions given, in grammar books, of the type of adjectives that take on *more* and the type of adjectives that take on *-er*. According to Clarke (2001), Quirk *et al.* (1985) and Thomson and Martinet (1986) as cited in Tobin (1990) for instance, longer adjectives of three or more syllables and some disyllabic adjectives will take on *more*, while other disyllabic adjectives and almost all monosyllabic adjectives will have the inflectional *-er* attached. Some disyllabic adjectives though, especially the ones ending in *-y* or *-ow*, can permit either *more* or *-er* (Clarke 2001, Quirk *et al.* 1985).

While these claims serve to provide some formalised criteria that supposedly direct our use of adjectival comparatives, the fact remains that these are criteria established

¹ Unless stated otherwise, *comparative(s)* refer(s) to *adjectival comparative(s)* here and throughout this paper.

based on a theory of how adults well-versed with the English language choose between comparatives *more* and *-er*. If they do indeed mirror the decision-making processes that mentally direct people to select one adjectival comparative form over another, we can only go so far to say that they reflect the decision-making processes of adult language users. It is questionable, though, if young children, who are still in the midst of acquiring adult-like competence in the language, are intuitively sensitive enough to the lexical features of adjectives to employ the same set of criteria that adults are assumed to employ. Will they, for instance, intuitively attend to adjectival length when they decide between *more* and *-er*? Could other principles, apart from the lexical constraints of the adjectives, be directing children's selection between either of the comparative forms? These are arguably valid questions given that children have been noted to use *more* on adjectives that supposedly take *-er*, e.g. **more high* in Tager-Flusberg's (1993) data. Conversely, as data in this paper will show, they sometimes select *-er* for adjectives that can take only *more*, e.g. **difficulter*. Attempting to explain children's (mis)uses of comparatives *more* and *-er* using established grammatical models as points of departure would do no more than tell us the extent to which children's use of the comparative matches the grammatical model and by implication, the extent to which children have internalised the criteria set out in these grammatical models. It would do little to tell us the principles that children attend to in negotiating between the two comparative forms. As Owens (1996) puts forth:

“ ... research is usually based on a model of language ... that may not reflect the language hypotheses of the child. Thus, the results might describe a child's fit or lack of fit to a model rather than the child's actual operating principles, hypotheses, or linguistic performance” (Owens 1996: 429).

This paper, therefore, proposes an alternative approach to understanding how children select between comparatives *more* and *-er*, one that will be drawn from existing child language developmental models instead of conventional grammatical models. The research question that this paper aims to address is: Can semantic transparency² and productivity, which have been used to account for children's preferences between *man* and *-er* in the expression of agency (Clark 1981, Clark 1993), be extended to account for children's preferences between *more* and *-er* in the expression of adjectival comparison? If it can be argued that children's intuitive principles for forming the

² *Semantic transparency* will henceforth be used interchangeably with *transparency*.

comparative differs from that found in grammar books, the next question that follows is how can we strike a balance between not writing off these intuitions completely as ‘erroneous’, since it can be shown that even adult use of adjectival comparatives does not always adhere to that defined in grammar books, and ensuring that children are still instructed in the typical workings of adjectival comparison, but in a way that is more reflective of actual usage.

2. Semantic transparency and productivity

Before addressing the research questions *per se*, an argument on why there is reason to believe that children may be attending to the principles of transparency and productivity when they choose comparative *more* over *-er* and vice versa is in order. This argument draws upon parallels that can be established between agentives *man* and *-er* and comparatives *more* and *-er*.

To begin with, there are two regularised ways of constructing agent nouns in English, just as there are two modes of expressing the comparative. Depending on the noun or verb concerned, we can attach either the noun *man*, e.g. *policeman* or the suffix *-er*, e.g. *gardener* to form the agent noun. Similarly, depending on the nature of an adjective-word, we can attach either *more* or *-er* to express the comparative. In both the expression of agency and adjectival comparison, one mode of expressing the desired meaning is a free form while the other is a bound form, that is, agentive *man* and comparative *more* are both free forms, while agentive *-er* and comparative *-er* are both bound forms. Thus, one is positioned to suspect, preliminarily at least, that if some principled explanation has been offered to explain why children sometimes mistakenly apply the free form *man* to express agency in cases where the bound form *-er* should be used (e.g. **gardenman* instead of *gardener*) and vice versa, this explanation may well apply to any unconventionality in their expression of adjectival comparison, since the expression of the latter essentially also boils down to a choice between a free and bound form. This suspicion is made weightier if one were to examine adjectival comparatives *more* and *-er* against the principles that have been used to explain children’s use of agentives *man* and *-er*.

For this, we must turn to Clark (1981, 1993), who argued that when children produce ‘erroneous’ agent nouns such as **gardenman* and **policer*, they are in fact driven by a set of language developmental principles. According to Clark (1981), there are two principles –transparency and productivity– at work when children of different ages

exhibit a preference for either mode of expressing agency, i.e. *man* or *-er*. The principle of transparency “... states that ... devices that mark their meaning clearly (i.e. with one-to-one matches of meaning and form) are easier to acquire than those where multiple meanings are expressed by one form ...” (Clark 1981: 313). It is this principle that would direct children, when constructing agent nouns, to: (1) “[l]ook for devices that mark only one meaning” and (2) “[l]ook for devices that are words in their own right” (Clark 1981: 313). According to Clark (1981), it is also this principle that directs younger children’s inclinations towards agentive *man* leading to erroneous forms like **gardenman* instead of *gardener*. Agentive *man* marks only one meaning, as opposed to agentive *-er*, which can convey two meanings, i.e. either the meaning of the agentive when it is used with verbs or the meaning of the comparative when it is used with adjectives, thereby putting agentive *man* in a better position to fulfil Clark’s (1981) criterion (1). Agentive *man* is also a word in its own right compared to agentive *-er*, which is a bound morpheme and by definition cannot stand on its own, again putting *man* in a better position as a more transparent form with reference to Clark’s (1981) criterion (2). As stated, “... the *-er* suffix for agency is less transparent than a compound with *-man* in second position since the noun *man* clearly denotes the kind of individual carrying out some action” (Clark 1981: 320). The principle of transparency, however, does not apply to children of all ages in Clark’s (1981) theory. The principle of productivity, which is measured by frequency, supposedly takes over when children are older, leading to a shift in inclination towards agentive *-er* with age. As Clark (1993: 126) stated, “the [devices that speakers] prefer for coinages and so use more frequently are productive” and since “... [agentive] *-er* is more productive than either [agentive] *-ist* or *-ian*” (Clark 1981: 312), older children will tend to overgeneralise the use of *-er*, thereby producing words like **bicycler* and **librarianer* alongside the correct forms *gardener*, *farmer* and *teacher* (Clark 1981).

The question on where or how the transparency-productivity approach can feature in the child comparative system lies in the plausibility of determining which of the two adjectival comparative forms, *more* or *-er*, is more transparent and which is more productive according to Clark’s (1981) criteria for these principles. Like agentive *man*, comparative *more* fulfils Clark’s (1981) two criteria for transparency. It is a word in its own right and compared to comparative *-er*, it is more representative of a device that marks only one meaning. Although the absolutely singular meaning of *more* may be debatable in view of the meaning of *intensity* it conveys when placed before an

adjective (e.g., *more beautiful*), and its slightly alternate meaning of *quantity* when placed before a noun (e.g., *more sausages*), the two meanings are similar in that they both convey the meaning of *a larger amount of something*. In comparison, *-er* has totally different meanings when suffixed as a marker of the comparative (e.g. *smaller*) and when suffixed as a marker of the agentive (e.g., *sweeper*), with the homophony between the two different uses of *-er* possibly making it less transparent than comparative *more*. The argument for a possible reduced transparency of *-er* to a language-learning child is not unfounded, given Mazzocco's (1999: 395) claim, based on Backscheider and Gelman's (1995) study on children's interpretation of homonyms, that "a one-to-one mapping rule does not appear to govern preschoolers' naming or interpretation responses overall". The transparency of *more* in relation to *-er* is reinforced by one other criterion, which I feel is worth taking into consideration although it was not one of the criteria listed by Clark, i.e. the fact that *more* is one of the earliest words children use (Braine 1963 as cited in Tager-Flusberg 1993, Gopnik and Meltzoff 1988, Hoff 2001). For this reason, it can be construed as one of the earliest words that children will understand semantically, and hence will logically be more transparent to them. On the other hand, if frequency is taken to be a valid measure of productivity (Clark 1981), then comparative *-er* can be deemed as more productive than comparative *more* since "*Aer* comparatives [or adjective comparative *-er*] are the most frequent of all comparative forms in English" (Rusiecki 1985: 88). Hence, the comparative form that is likely to be preferred if transparency is the governing principle can be inferred to be the opposite of the comparative form that is likely to be preferred if productivity is the governing principle.

Given the parallels between agentive *man* and comparative *more* and between agentive *-er* and comparative *-er* in terms of surface-level similarities and the plausibility of characterisation in terms of the transparency-productivity model, there is no reason why the age-bound applicability of transparency and productivity in children's inclinations towards using *man* or *-er* to express agency cannot then be hypothesised to underlie their intuitions on whether to use *more* or *-er* in expressing adjectival comparison. Such a scenario would manifest itself through a preference for *more* by younger children with a corresponding preference for *-er* by their older counterparts.

3. Methodology

To examine if this was indeed the case, a judgement task was undertaken on 10 Singapore children between the ages of five and six (i.e., the younger group) and 10 Singapore children between the ages of eight and nine (i.e., the older group) as part of a larger undergraduate study, which included an elicited production task (Chua 2004). Only the judgement task will be reported in this paper due to space constraints.

All the children who took part in this study have had some schooling experience in the English medium, with the younger group (i.e., those between the ages of five and six) being either in Kindergarten Year One or Kindergarten Year Two and the older group (i.e., those between the ages of eight and nine) being either in Primary One or Primary Two in the Singapore school context. In the judgement task, the children were basically required to say whether the *more* + *adjective* version of an adjectival comparison contextualised within a sentence sounded better or whether the *adjective* + *-er* version of the same adjectival comparison contextualised within the same sentence sounded better. For example, they were asked to judge verbally if, say, “The dog is more big than the cat” sounded better or if “The dog is bigger than the cat” sounded better. The judgement task was conducted on a one-to-one basis. Each pair of sentences containing the targeted adjective was first read aloud to the child before a request was made for a judgement of preference with specific reference to the two comparative options. Effort was taken to ensure that intonation, when reading the sentences, was kept consistent. The duration of the judgement task was about 15 minutes per child.

To ensure a representative range of adjectives, each child was asked to make judgements on 20 adjectives altogether; five of them can supposedly take only *-er* in typical usage (e.g., *big*, *tall*), five can supposedly take only *more* (e.g. *hardworking*, *beautiful*), five can take either *more* or *-er* (e.g., *friendly*, *lonely*), and five are nonce adjectives, that is, adjective-words that do not exist and that the children would not have by any chance encountered before. The nonce adjectives included a combination of those that are likely to take only *-er* (e.g., **criff*), those that are likely to take only *more* (e.g. **fausilating*), and those that are likely to be able to take either *more* or *-er* (e.g., **wuggy*). The inclusion of the nonce category is intended to provide some buffer for ensuring that at least for one category in the judgement task, children have no choice but to see comparatives *more* and *-er* as units that are set apart from the root adjective in making their choices. This will help to counter the possibility of some children giving replies that are not reflective of a genuine choice between *more* and *-er*, but are

reflective of whatever adjectival comparative reply that has already been fossilised and stored as a single unit in their linguistic repertoire. For example, many in the field of child language development may argue that when a child chooses *more beautiful* instead of **beautifully*, it may not be because she actually prefers *more* to *-er*. It may be because *more beautiful* has, for some reason, been stored as one single unit in the child's linguistic repertoire. The possibility of this occurring can be avoided for nonce adjectives, which cannot possibly exist in the child's linguistic repertoire, let alone be stored as a single unit with either *more* or *-er*.

4. Findings

With 20 adjectives and 10 children from each age group, a total of 200 comparative replies were expected from each age group. Findings indicated that out of the 200 comparative replies from the younger group, the *more* + *adjective* version of expressing comparison was selected in 144 instances while the *adjective* + *-er* version was selected in 56 instances. Conversely, out of the 200 comparative replies from the older group, the *more* + *adjective* version of expressing comparison was selected in 74 instances while the *adjective* + *-er* version was selected in 126 instances (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency across age: Raw scores

Adjectives	Younger group: 5 to 6 yr-olds		Older group: 8 to 9 yr-olds	
	<i>More</i> replies	<i>-Er</i> replies	<i>More</i> replies	<i>-Er</i> replies
All adjectives	144	56	74	126
Adj that take <i>-er</i>	25	25	0	50
Adj that take <i>more</i>	42	8	41	9
Adj that take either <i>more</i> or <i>-er</i>	35	15	19	31
Nonce adjectives	42	8	14	36

Within the younger group, there was a higher frequency of comparative *more* than *-er* replies for three out of these four categories. Conversely, the older group had a higher frequency of comparative *-er* than *more* replies, also for three out of these four categories. Additionally, if we look at the findings across both age groups in Table 1, frequencies of *more* replies did drop as children get older and in place of this, children

went for the *-er* form with age. For example, the frequency of *more* replies for adjectives that can take either comparative *more* or *-er* in typical usage is higher for the younger children at 35 than for the older children at 19. Conversely, the frequency of *-er* replies for this same category of adjectives is about twice as high for the older group at 31 than for the younger group at 15. As for nonce adjectives, the younger group exhibited a preference for comparative *more* (42 *more* replies; 8 *-er* replies) while the older group exhibited a preference for comparative *-er* (14 *more* replies; 36 *-er* replies).

A chi-square (χ^2) test ran on the raw scores in Table 1 showed a significance of association between age groups and replies at the .001 level (see Table 2).

Table 2. Chi-square results (χ^2): All adjectives

	<i>More</i> replies	<i>-Er</i> replies	Total
Younger group: 5 to 6 year-olds	144	56	200
Older group: 8 to 9 year-olds	74	126	200
Total	218	182	400
$\chi^2=49.4$; $df=1$; $p\leq.001$			

Similar trends of age-associated preferences at the .001 level of significance were also noted when χ^2 tests were run on the raw score replies for adjectives that can take only *-er* in typical usage (see Table 3), adjectives that can take either *more* or *-er* (see Table 4), and the nonce category of adjectives (see Table 5).

Table 3. Chi-square results (χ^2): *-Er* adjectives

	<i>More</i> replies	<i>-Er</i> replies	Total
Younger group: 5 to 6 year-olds	25	25	50
Older group: 8 to 9 year-olds	0	50	50
Total	25	75	100
$\chi^2=33.3$; $df=1$; $p\leq.001$			

Table 4. Chi-square results (χ^2): *More/-er* adjectives

	<i>More</i> replies	<i>-Er</i> replies	Total
Younger group: 5 to 6 year-olds	35	15	50
Older group: 8 to 9 year-olds	19	31	50
Total	54	46	100
$\chi^2=10.3$; $df=1$; $p\leq.001$			

Table 5. Chi-square results (χ^2): *Nonce* adjectives

	<i>More</i> replies	<i>-Er</i> replies	Total
Younger group: 5 to 6 year-olds	42	8	50
Older group: 8 to 9 year-olds	14	36	50
Total	56	44	100
$\chi^2=31.8$; $df=1$; $p\leq.001$			

The only category of adjectives where the older group actually had a higher frequency of *-er* than *more* replies was the category that can take only *more* in typical usage. However, as shown in Table 6, the p-value of more than .05 indicates that the age-associated frequencies in this table are not significant enough to refute earlier trends of older children preferring *-er* either.

Table 6. Chi-square results (χ^2): *More* adjectives

	<i>More</i> replies	<i>-Er</i> replies	Total
Younger group: 5 to 6 year-olds	42	8	50
Older group: 8 to 9 year-olds	41	9	50
Total	83	17	100
$\chi^2=0.071$; $df=1$; $p>.79$			

5. Discussion

The first implication of these findings has to do with the plausibility of positing a role for transparency and productivity in the child comparative system, in answer to the research question set out at the beginning of this paper. The second implication has to do with how these findings can impact the teaching of adjectival comparison.

General trends of preference for comparative *more* by the younger children and conversely, for comparative *-er* by their older counterparts, jointly suggest that like the choice between agentives *man* and *-er*, children could well be attending to the language developmental principles of transparency and productivity when they make a choice between comparatives *more* and *-er*. This is especially since the findings here echo findings from earlier investigations on children's knowledge and production of adjectival comparisons. As Clarke (2001: 12) concludes of findings from his study, which also involved a judgement task, "[r]esults ... showed that ... initial preference for the periphrastic form [i.e. *more* + *adjective* form] ... perhaps decreases with age with a possible turn towards the suffixed form [i.e., *adjective* + *-er* form]". Principled explanations for why children exhibit age-bound preference patterns, however, are clearly missing from these earlier works since their focus often lies in examining the extent to which children's use of adjectival comparison aligns with that dictated in grammar books and which supposedly typify adult norms. This paper has served to fill the gap in these earlier works by positing and arguing for a principled explanation in children's patterns of preferences for expressing the adjectival comparative. Whilst it is not the case that the younger group exhibited a preference for comparative *more* without exceptions and neither is it the case that the older group exhibited a preference for comparative *-er* without exceptions, the trend in general coupled with the χ^2 tests of significance does show that the younger children are more inclined towards *more* while their older counterparts are more inclined towards *-er*. This conclusion is reinforced by the significance of association between age groups and preferences for the nonce adjectives, which indicates that where there is uncertainty, which would be the case for adjectives novel to the children, the younger group would go for *more* while their older counterparts would go for *-er*. There is therefore much reason to say that transparency and productivity can and do have a role to play in the child comparative system.

Given this, one should also begin to ponder about the conventional models of adjectival comparison put forth to children in the classroom. They are certainly not based on children's intuitive principles of transparency and productivity for clearly in schools, at least in the schools from where this study was conducted, lessons on adjectival comparison are usually centred around theorised grammatical models. Children are usually taught adjectival comparison through rote-learning combined with occasional strategies that get them to attend to constraints like adjectival length when deciding between *more* and *-er*. As expressed by this ex-primary-school-teacher when

asked how adjectival comparison is taught: "... very much rote-learning. Basically it's a list of adjectives that students learn. Usually long words use 'more' and short adjectives use '-er'" (personal communication). If these strategies or the models from which they are derived do mirror actual usage, that is all well and good, but what if actual usage is increasingly deviating from that defined in grammar books. As Dammers (2004) pointed out in The Linguist List:

"Just a few decades ago, almost all one-syllable adjectives, most two-syllable adjectives, and many longer ones formed the comparative and absolute by adding -er and -est respectively. To-day [*sic*], it is not uncommon to hear native speakers of AE [American English] and BE [British English] up to at least their mid-thirties write ... and say ... such things as "more small" and "more quick." Even the word "well" seems almost universally to be constructed as "more well" and "most well" ...".

The fuzzy line between when to use *more* and when to use -er is reinforced in the advice given by *Cassell's Students' English Grammar* "that when in doubt with regard to disyllabic adjectives, one ought to opt for the 'more/most' option rather than the 'er/est' combination" (Tobin 1990: 197). As Mondorf (2004) puts forth in a message to The Linguist List, "the situation for the comparative formation of—even monosyllabic—ADJs has never been as clear-cut as grammar books suggest". If the choice between *more* and -er has been shown to be arbitrary rather than rule-governed even for competent adult English language users, the bigger question to ask then is by teaching and assessing children's (mis)uses of adjectival comparison according to a grammarian's theory, are we then prescribing a fiction of how English adjectival comparison works, a fiction that corresponds neither with the rationale behind how children deal with it nor with how adults are increasingly dealing with it? In a vein similar to Bhatia's (2002) question about whether "generic description [is] a reflection of reality or a convenient fiction invented by applied linguists for pedagogical and other purposes" (p. 6), the question here is: Are the conditions that supposedly govern the choice between comparatives *more* and -er reflective of actual comparative use or are they simply a convenient fiction invented by grammarians?

It is certainly not the intention of this paper to advocate that the teaching of which adjectives should take *more*, which should take -er and which can permit either be stopped, but one can easily imagine alternatives to conventional rule-based, drill-and-

practice methods of grammatical teaching. Teachers may trial the use of corpus linguistics, for instance, by having children analyse real life, dynamic uses of comparatives *more* and *-er* through a corpus of texts of sorts. In this sense, children are not learning through theories of use dictated by grammar books, but through theories of use constructed out of their own intuitions in comparison to observations from real life data condensed through a corpus to serve the practical needs of classroom learning. ‘Misuses’ of adjectival comparison (e.g., *more small**) by children in this sort of learning context would present opportunities for seeking out the principles directing children to produce these forms, after which children may then be guided to compare their own principles of use with the principles of use as inferred from corpus data. If there are indeed a good number of *more small*s* in the corpus data of competent adult language users, children should not then be marked down for both the principle behind their attaching of *more* to *small* and/or their very production of *more small**. After all, language use is dynamic rather than static. According to Lawler (2001) for instance:

“English has been losing inflections (e.g. adjective + *-er*) for a thousand years, and replacing them with syntax (e.g. adjective + *more*) ... That’s why syntax is where it’s at for English grammar”.

6. Conclusion

This paper has perhaps raised more questions than it seeks to answer, and its pedagogical suggestions may be over-ambitious to teachers who are used to conventional methods of drill and practice. Nevertheless, the impracticality of teaching children a set of theorised rules that neither corresponds with their intuitive principles for choosing between the two comparative forms nor fully reflects actual conventional use of adjectival comparison should not be overlooked. The proposed strategy of using corpus analyses to teach children when to use *more* and when to use *-er* aims to encourage empirical trial of alternative ways of teaching adjectival comparison that more closely reflects actual use. Where pedagogy is concerned, one may do better to address discrepancies between children’s intuitive principles of how adjectival comparison works and how it is actually used, rather than discrepancies between those intuitions and a theorised model that neither reflects actual usage nor is responsive to its dynamism.

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