



Estetisk-filosofiska fakulteten

Fredrik Smeds

Adjective Comparison in Contemporary British English
A Corpus Study of More than One Hundred Adjectives

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Handledare: Michael Wherrity

Karlstads universitet 651 88 Karlstad
Tfn 054-700 10 00 Fax 054-700 14 60
Information@kau.se www.kau.se

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- Abstract:** There are mainly two ways of comparing adjectives in English: the analytic and the synthetic. The analytic way is to use *more* and *most* (for example *difficult*, *more difficult*, *most difficult*). The synthetic, or inflectional, way is to add the endings *-er* and *-est* (for instance *fast*, *faster*, *fastest*). During the last twelve centuries the way of forming comparisons in English has evolved from predominately synthetic to the point where both inflections and analytic forms are used. Today many adjectives are almost always compared either synthetically or analytically (e.g. *fast* and *difficult* respectively), but sometimes we have two alternatives; for example, we can choose between *more polite* and *politer*. The author has three aims with this paper: firstly, to examine how adjectives in English are compared today; secondly, to determine how well the descriptions in modern grammars agree with authentic written English; thirdly, to see whether there have been any recent changes in the way of indicating comparison. This is a quantitative study. A corpus investigation was undertaken: some one hundred common adjectives in two British newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, from 1990–91 and 2005 that vary in their way of expressing comparison were studied. The results were compared with six grammars from the last five decades. After the data collection, the χ^2 -test was applied, showing how statistically significant the changes between 1990–91 and 2005 are. Judging from the data in this study, the synthetic comparison seems to be becoming less common. The author also concludes that the comparison of adjectives in contemporary British English varies considerably.
- Nyckelord:** Adjective comparison, Present-day British English, Language change, Corpus study

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1. INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

There are two ways of comparing adjectives in English: the analytic and the synthetic. The analytic way is to use *more* and *most* (for example *difficult*, *more difficult*, *most difficult*); this is also called phrasal or periphrastic comparison. The synthetic, or inflectional, way is to add the endings *-er* and *-est* (for instance *fast*, *faster*, *fastest*). If the two ways are combined (*more cheaper*), it is called double comparison and this is considered as non-standard; so are hybrid forms such as *bestest*. A few adjectives have a different stem in the positive (e.g. *good*, *bad*) and in the comparative and the superlative (*better*, *best* and *worse*, *worst*). Not all adjectives can be compared; in other words, not all are gradable. A word is either disyllabic or not, so we cannot say *the more disyllabic word* or *the most disyllabic word*.

The adjective inflectional system in Modern English is simpler than in Swedish, German and Old English. A Swedish example is *ett litet barn* ('a little child') and *en liten pojke* ('a little boy'), where the adjective ending is determined by the gender (neuter or common) of the following noun. In Modern English, on the other hand, the only adjective inflections left are those of the synthetic comparison. During the last twelve centuries the way of forming comparisons in English has evolved from predominately synthetic to the point where both inflections and periphrastic forms are used. Today many adjectives are almost always compared either synthetically or analytically (e.g. *fast* and *difficult* respectively), but sometimes we have two alternatives; for example, we can choose between *more polite* and *politer*.

I have three aims with this paper: firstly, to examine how adjectives in English are compared today; secondly, to determine how well the descriptions in modern grammars agree with how adjectives are compared in authentic written English; thirdly, to see whether there have been any recent changes in the way of indicating comparison. It will be a quantitative study.

2. BACKGROUND

I will begin with a survey of adjective comparison in six grammars from the last five decades. Thereafter come a brief history of adjective comparison from Old English to the present-day and a review of recent research.

2.1. Adjective comparison according to grammar books

First I will give a survey and then I will point out differences between the grammars. The basic principle is that most monosyllabic adjectives are compared with endings. When it comes to disyllabic adjectives, especially the ones with certain endings, they are compared synthetically. The endings are *-y* as in *happy*, *-le* as in *noble*, *-ow* as in *narrow*, *-er* as in *clever*, and *-ure* as in *mature*. Some grammars distinguish between *-y* and *-ly* (as in *likely*). There are also a number of disyllabic adjectives without these particular endings that can be compared synthetically: *cruel*, *handsome*, *common*, *quiet*, *pleasant*, *sincere*, *wicked*, *minute* and *solid*. One grammar (Biber *et al.* 1999: 523) lists many more disyllabic adjectives that occasionally are compared with endings, for example *boring* and *stupid*.

However, there are exceptions. Apart from *tired*, participles such as *worn* do not take endings, whatever the number of syllables. Most grammars say that *right*, *wrong*, *real* and *like* never take endings and one grammar (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1583) includes monosyllabic adjectives such as *cross*, *fake*, *ill*, *loath*, *prime* and *worth*. On the other hand, certain monosyllabic adjectives can be compared analytically: *Wouldn't that be more fair?* (Biber *et al.* 1999: 522). Finally, the disyllabic adjectives *proper* and *eager* are never inflected in spite of ending in *-er*.

Turning to trisyllabic adjectives, those beginning with *un-* like *unhappy* can be compared with endings. *Almighty* can take the superlative *almightiest* while *shadowy* and *slippery* can take endings, but seldom do (Biber *et al.* 1999: 522). In non-standard dialects endings can be used for adjectives with three or more syllables, even if they do not begin with *un-*; there also double comparisons like *more lovelier* and *most unkindest* occur (Greenbaum 1996: 140).

Not only the morphology of the adjective itself but also syntax affects the comparison. Firstly, endings are not needed if a monosyllabic adjective is co-ordinated with a longer one: *the most frank and outspoken criticism* (Gabrielson 1964: 87). Secondly, most adjectives can be analytically compared if followed by *than* as in *John is more mad than Bob is* (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 462).

The oldest grammar used in this investigation is from 1964 and the newest from 2002, so it is not surprising that they differ in their descriptions of the language. While older grammars were based on the writer's knowledge of the language and on earlier grammars, most modern grammars are corpus-based. One corpus-based grammar (Biber *et al.* 1999: 523) lists many rare comparisons that earlier grammars have not mentioned. All the grammars are descriptive, and a tendency is that the word *always* is seldom used nowadays; instead modern grammars write *in general*. Not all grammars mention the ending *-ure* as in *obscure* and the newest grammar (Huddleston & Pullum 2002) does not mention the ending *-er* as in *clever*. Trisyllabic adjectives are not discussed in all grammars; one of them, however, (Gabrielson 1964: 86) states that they are not inflected, and only one grammar (Greenbaum 1996: 140) discusses non-standard dialects.

From the examples in the grammars we see that comparison has changed in some cases: modern grammars state that *handsome*, *wicked* and *common* are analytically compared, but according to the older grammars they were often compared with endings. *Polite* can now be compared in either way. According to two grammars (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 462; Svartvik & Sager 1996: 279) endings seem to be becoming less common.

2.2. History of adjective comparison in English

In Old English the adjectives were compared with endings. The comparative was built by adding *-ra* as in *heardra* and the superlative by adding *-ost(a)* as in *heardost(a)* or *-est(a)* as in *lengest(a)*. In Middle English the comparative ending was weakened to *-re* as in *hardre* and in the superlative to *-est(e)* as in *hardest(e)*. After a svarabhakti vowel had been developed before *r* (*hardere*) and the unstressed final *-e* had disappeared in Late Middle English, the ending *-er* (*harder*) of Modern English was left (Rynell 1974: 78).¹

The periphrastic forms first appeared in English in the thirteenth century (Kytö & Romaine 1997: 330). They were not so common and, in contrast to modern usage, they were chiefly found with short adjectives (Burrow & Turville-Petre 2005: 44). The reason why they were introduced could be owing to the influence of Latin and French, languages that do not express comparison with endings, although the analytic comparison has also been introduced in other Germanic languages, such as Swedish, which have had much less contact with Romance languages than English.

¹ *Svarabhakti* means 'insertion of a supporting vowel between certain types of consonants'.

Double comparison was common in Middle English and Early Modern English and occurs in Shakespeare's dramas as well as in King James Bible (Barber 1997: 147). Today it has disappeared from written English, but can still be heard in spoken English. The same is true for hybrid forms such as *worser* and *bestest* (Kytö & Romaine 1997: 331, 338).

The periphrastic forms steadily became more frequent after the fourteenth century until, by the end of the sixteenth century, they were as frequent as they are today (Kytö & Romaine 1997: 330). In Early Modern English the choice of comparison was freer than today and forms like *beautifuller* and *more near* were rather frequent (Odenstedt 2000: 102). There is evidence that the endings were considered colloquial and *more* and *most* formal, but, in general, any adjective could be compared either way: Shakespeare writes *sweetest* as well as *most sweet*. Inflected forms of polysyllabic adjectives such as *notorious*, *perfect*, *learned*, *shameful* and *careful* also occurred (Barber 1997: 147). As late as 1926, a linguist claimed that *awkward*, *brazen*, *buxom*, *crooked* and *equal* could take endings 'without disagreeably challenging attention' (Fowler quoted in Görlach 1999: 66).²

2.3. Recent research on adjective comparison in contemporary English

A corpus study by Kytö and Romaine shows that the percentage of inflectional comparatives increased from 52% in 1750–1800 to 69% in 1900–1950, whereas that of inflectional superlatives remained at 53% in both periods (1997: 337). In a later study they found that the figures for 1950–1990 were 62% and 63%, respectively (2000: 177). Many linguists suggest that today the synthetic comparison is becoming less common, but these figures contradict this.³

Barber (1997: 146) sees the changes in adjective comparison as a part of the evolution of English from a synthetic to an analytic language. Mondorf (2003: 253) cites a parallel development in the case of the two ways of building the genitive in English, where the *of*-genitive is used in what she refers to as 'more demanding environments.' She investigates *more*-support along the same lines:

In cognitively more demanding environments which require an increased processing load, language users tend to make up for the additional effort by resorting to the analytic (*more*) rather than the synthetic (*-er*) comparative (2003: 252).

² Henry W. Fowler. 1926. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford: Clarendon, 142.

³ Quirk *et al.* (1985: 462), Svartvik and Sager (1996: 279), Leech and Culpeper (1997: 361), Barber (1997: 146).

She gives several reasons for *more*-support related to phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics and syntax.

Contrary to most grammars, Mondorf states that there are more important reasons for the choice of comparison than the number of syllables in the positive. Firstly, the number of syllables in the comparative is a factor: *sensibler* is shorter than *more sensible*. I agree, but would have chosen the more common example *simpler* instead. Secondly, trisyllabic adjectives beginning with *un-* can take endings. Thirdly, this is also the case with some polysyllabic compounds such as *environment-friendlier* (Mondorf 2003: 257).

The frequency, too, is important. Rare adjectives such as *apt* tend to be analytically compared more often than common adjectives like *hard*. New adjectives such as *fun* (originally a noun) are usually not inflected (Mondorf 2003: 259ff). It is to be noted that *apt* is not mentioned in the grammars.

Concerning the endings of disyllabic adjectives mentioned in the grammars, Mondorf finds that *ready* takes analytical comparison in 56% of the cases in her corpus study, whereas *lucky* only is compared analytically in 3% of the cases. She finds no reason why adjectives ending in *-r* and *-re* (*clever, mature*) should take the ending *-er*: she thinks that there are reasons for two identical consonants (/r/) to be avoided. Her corpus study shows that *mature* is usually compared analytically (2003: 259). She compares these endings with adjectives ending in *-st* as *just* and *moist* that seldom take the superlative ending *-est* (2003: 279). However, the superlative *fastest* is almost always used. Mondorf shows that it is wrong to treat all disyllabic adjectives ending in syllabic /l/ equally, as the ones ending in *-l* tend to take phrasal comparison, whereas those ending in *-le* are usually inflected (2003: 283f).

Pragmatic reasons such as clarity for analytic comparison are often discussed. Nevertheless a phrase like *I asked more polite questions* is ambiguous, since *more* can refer to the adjective ('politer questions') as well as to the noun ('more questions'). Not surprisingly, opinions on which comparison is the most expressive differ. Some claim that inflected superlatives are more expressive (*the unhappiest creature in the world*), but a counter-argument is that *more* and *most* can be stressed in speech, thereby making the comparison more salient than is possible with the inflected form.⁴

As for semantics, Mondorf states that when the meaning is concrete, adjectives tend to be inflected: *the beer is bitterer* (concrete) vs. *the more bitter takeover battles of the past* (abstract). The figures from her corpus study of *remote* in the concrete and the abstract sense

⁴ For a discussion, see for example Leech and Culpeper (1997: 368f), Mondorf (2003: 266f) or Biber *et al.* (1999: 522).

are clear: when expressing concrete meanings, *remoter* is used in 88% of the cases, whereas it is used in 44% expressing abstract meanings. Further, she states that adjectives that are less gradable tend to be analytically compared (2003: 289f). A study by Leech and Culpeper supports this. Nevertheless, as they found that *right*, *wrong* and *dead* were seldom compared in their study, they suggest that these adjectives are ‘not very gradable’ (1997: 356).

Leech and Culpeper mention three contextual factors to be taken into account when considering why monosyllabic adjectives take periphrastic comparison:

- (1) A following *than*: I am *more proud* of this card than of this badge
- (2) Degree modifiers: I was much *more sick* of being unemployed
- (3) Co-ordination and parallelism: their achievement becomes more impressive and their status *more clear*

The first and the third factor are mentioned in some of the grammars, but the second is not. Finally, there are other cases than these three: *In East Berlin, President Mitterrand was more blunt*. Leech and Culpeper point out that in all four of these examples the periphrastic forms are used predicatively (1997: 357). Also Mondorf concludes in a later study that adjectives in predicative position take analytic comparison more often than adjectives in attributive position, but *clever* seems to be an exception (2003: 275ff). However, superlatives are considered in neither study.

In order to examine language changes, Leech and Culpeper compared disyllabic adjectives in a corpus from 1961 with those in a corpus containing texts from the 1980s and the early 1990s. They found that the adjectives ending in *-y* were solidly inflectional—with some minor differences between the corpora—but that the group ending in *-ly* took synthetic comparison less frequently in the later corpus, and the change was highly significant statistically. Leech and Culpeper found that other disyllabic adjectives such as *quiet*, *clever*, *narrow* and *shallow* were strongly inflectional in the later corpus (1997: 361).

As a number of earlier linguists had suggested that a final stress is an important factor in determining whether disyllabic adjectives are to be inflected, Leech and Culpeper investigated 22 such words of which all but *akin* and *aware* were loanwords. Apart from the ones ending in *-ure* (*mature*, *obscure*, *secure*) and *polite*, often mentioned in the grammars, they found inflectional comparatives of *compact*, *complete*, *intense*, *severe*, *profound* and *remote*, whereof the two latter were quite frequent (10% and 32%). However, 10 of the 22 words were never inflected, so Leech and Culpeper concluded that the comparison had changed, since it seemed unlikely that so many earlier linguists were wrong (1997: 361ff). The fact that 20 of

the 22 words were loanwords supports Mondorf's statement that in more demanding environments language users tend to prefer the analytic comparative (see above). Moreover, Leech and Culpeper conclude that a number of other disyllabic adjectives such as *common* and *likely* seem to be shifting towards periphrastic comparison (1997: 371).

Lindquist (1998) studied *The Independent* from 1995 and found that disyllabic adjectives ending in *-y* were inflected in 83% of the cases in the comparative and in 97% of the cases in the superlative. The corresponding percentages for disyllabic adjectives ending in *-ly* were 54% and 80%. Here the very common words *likely* (98% analytic) and *early* (100% synthetic) are not included (1998: 207ff). These results support what others have stated: the disyllabic adjectives ending in *-y* are more often inflected than those ending in *-ly*, while endings are more frequent in the superlative.

Like many others Barber also states that the synthetic comparison is becoming less common. He mentions *cloudy, common, cruel, pleasant, quiet* and *simple* which 'a few years ago' were normally inflected, but now usually take phrasal comparison. He adds that some younger speakers use *more* and *most* even with monosyllabic adjectives (1997: 146). The same tendency has been observed also in other Germanic languages such as Swedish and Danish, but there are no signs of a shift in German (Kytö & Romaine 1997: 345ff).

In conclusion, comparison was expressed synthetically in Old English and the analytic comparison was introduced later, during the Middle English period. In Early Modern English the choice of comparison was freer than today: analytic comparison of monosyllabic adjectives (*most sweet*) was not uncommon and there were many inflected forms of polysyllabic adjectives that now have disappeared, such as *beautifuller*.

Kytö and Romaine conclude that although inflected comparatives have become less frequent, inflected superlatives have become more so. The study by Leech and Culpeper supports the first conclusion. Thus, an ongoing change in the analytic direction is likely in the formation of comparatives, but is apparently not taking place in the case of the superlatives. Perhaps the superlatives, which are less common, are the last to change.

The situation today is not easy to describe. In general, the grammars state that short adjectives are inflected and long adjectives are not, with some exceptions. They add rules based on morphology, and sometimes rules based on syntax. However, the situation is more complicated. The reasons why speakers choose one or the other form to express comparison are related to all core fields of linguistics: morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and phonology.

3. METHODS

The primary sources for this study are the British newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Observer* on CD-ROM. I have used three editions: 1990, 1991 and 2005. They contain approximately 22.5, 25.9 and 37.7 million words, respectively. In this study I have merged the corpora from 1990 and 1991 into one corpus, which I have compared with the 2005 corpus. Both corpora contain both newspapers.

When counting occurrences, I have deleted irrelevant items such as nouns ending in *-er* (*commoner*) and adverbs such as *likely*: *Most likely, it will be rain tomorrow*. Concerning *likely* and *unlikely*, I have considered those cases where they clearly function as adjectives as when they pre-modify a noun (*the most unlikely reason*) or are used predicatively (*She is most likely to win*). Besides degree, the word *more* can also be used to express amount and number as in *more bitter beer* and *more pleasant meetings*. Also *most* can express number as in *Most rude people are young*. In such cases I have studied the context to determine the relevant sense. Absolute superlatives like *a most happy country* are not included. I have also excluded one Shakespeare quotation and two quotations from Charles Dickens. In short, included in this study are only modern cases where there is a choice between analytic and synthetic comparison.

As regards my choice of adjectives, I have examined those that are explicitly mentioned in grammars and earlier studies, common adjectives with endings such as *-y* and a few trisyllabic adjectives beginning with *un-*. I have also added some other adjectives. Very common adjectives with very little variation in comparison, such as *big* and *early*, are not included; nor are adjectives with too few occurrences, for example *yellow*.

After having collected the data, I applied a well-known statistical method called the χ^2 -test to show how statistically significant the changes between 1990–91 and 2005 are. According to Johannesson (1990: 92) it is customary in linguistic investigations to choose an error probability *p* not greater than 5%, which means that we can be 95% sure that the results are not owing to chance. However, when the expected values (used in the calculation, see Appendix 3) are lower than 5, the test is not reliable (Johannesson 1990: 93) and then I give no χ^2 value. This means that no conclusion can be drawn for rare forms. I have also calculated percentages for the synthetic forms to see whether they are as common as the grammars say.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The adjectives are divided into groups suggested in the grammars. Group 1 consists of monosyllabic adjectives. Groups 2–7 are disyllabic adjectives: group 2 end in *-y*, group 3 in *-ly*, group 4 in *-er*, *-ere*, *-ure*, group 5 in *-ow*, group 6 in *-le* and group 7 contains other disyllabic adjectives. Group 8 consists of trisyllabic adjectives. The following eight sections contain two tables each: one for comparatives and one for superlatives. In the tables the χ^2 value is given when it is reliable (that is when the expected values are not less than 5, see Appendix 3). The values for the error probability p are given only when they are 25% or lower. The emphasis is mine in all the quoted examples. More examples are given in Appendix 1. Percentages are given in Appendix 2. I will compare my data with the grammars and with previous research. The chapter ends with a summary of the χ^2 -test.

4.1. Monosyllabic adjectives

This is the biggest group. Tables 1a and 1b show that inflected forms of *apt*, *just*, and *real* are rare. *Real* is often mentioned as an exception in the grammars, but the other two are not. *Shy* is seldom compared. We see that analytic comparison is not uncommon for other monosyllabic adjectives, especially *sick*, *sure*, *keen*, *free*, *vague* and *true*, contrary to the impression one get from some grammars that monosyllabic adjectives are almost always inflected. *Blunt*, too, is quite often compared analytically in the comparative. Moreover, the following example shows that other adjectives in this group can be compared analytically as well:

They're hearing what I'm rapping about for the first time! 'What does Rodney do for a living? This? Can't he sing about something a bit more nice?' (2005)

This is an example of spoken language; language changes often appear first in speech.

Table 1a. Monosyllabic words. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990-91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990-91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Apter	3	0	27	23		
Blunter	11	23	24	36	0.83	
Bolder	63	74	66	75	0.04	
Braver	21	41	24	43	0.10	
Calmer	74	128	75	133	0.03	
Clearer	481	488	526	499	1.09	
Drier	83	80	83	83	0.06	
Duller	34	57	36	59	0.01	
Fairer	226	377	234	383	0.05	
Fonder	13	11	13	13	0.17	
Freer	62	49	80	62	0.01	
Greener	139	134	142	140	0.03	
Greyer	21	23	24	26	0.00	
Juster	1	1	35	11		
Keener	82	67	103	79	0.15	
Nicer	104	203	104	204	0.00	
Paler	28	26	28	27	0.02	
Poorer	634	724	636	726	0.00	
Purer	29	31	33	33	0.07	
Rarer	95	81	100	86	0.00	
Realer	1	2	52	73		
Ruder	22	27	22	27	0.00	
Sadder	44	51	48	54	0.02	
Safer	543	619	545	625	0.01	
Sharper	302	226	304	229	0.01	
Shyer	1	8	2	11		
Sicker	13	17	15	22	0.10	
Smoother	53	59	55	60	0.01	
Softer	250	256	251	259	0.01	
Straighter	32	31	34	38	0.32	
Surer	39	25	48	39	0.86	
Tamer	9	6	10	7	0.01	
Truer	54	69	80	102	0.00	
Vaguer	16	6	21	8	0.00	

An example of an analytic superlative reads

The most clear evidence has been based around research on acute and chronic pain.
(2005)

The inflected comparatives were in general less frequent than the inflected superlatives. No changes are statistically significant in this group.

Table 1b. Monosyllabic words. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Aptest	1	0	11	1		
Bluntest	7	4	7	4		
Boldest	40	50	41	51	0.00	
Bravest	35	37	36	38	0.00	
Calмест	7	12	7	12	0.00	
Clearest	154	119	155	120	0.00	
Driest	39	58	39	58	0.00	
Dullest	60	34	60	34	0.00	
Fairest	40	37	42	38	0.01	
Fondest	17	10	18	11	0.01	
Freest	17	2	23	3		
Greenest	31	35	31	36	0.01	
Greyest	5	5	5	5	0.00	
Justest	0	0	7	1		
Keenest	70	42	75	49	0.19	
Nicest	65	136	65	136	0.00	
Palest	6	25	6	26	0.01	
Poorest	623	1118	623	1119	0.00	
Purest	52	74	55	79	0.00	
Rarest	80	72	84	74	0.02	
Realest	1	2	2	6		
Rudest	15	25	15	26	0.01	
Saddest	76	94	76	94	0.00	
Safest	190	174	190	175	0.03	
Sharpest	213	137	214	137	0.00	
Shyest	1	2	2	4		
Sickest	8	14	8	16	0.09	
Smoothest	14	31	14	31	0.00	
Softest	27	23	27	23	0.00	
Straightest	20	11	20	11	0.00	
Surest	43	31	45	33	0.01	
Tamest	8	4	8	4		
Truest	19	23	22	24	0.11	
Vaguest	17	17	17	18	0.03	

4.2. Disyllabic adjectives ending in –y

The most common ending for disyllabic adjectives is –y. The adjectives in Tables 2a and 2b, except *ready*, were mostly inflected. Nevertheless, other adjectives in this group were sometimes compared analytically as well:

The nightly body counts from Baghdad are echo enough of that earlier, more bloody conflict in Vietnam, the scars of which still track vividly across the American psyche. (2005)

We see in Table 2b that *lazy*, *tasty*, *empty*, *hungry* and *ready* are seldom used in the superlative. No changes are statistically significant in this group.

Table 2a. Disyllabic words ending in *-y*. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990-91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990-91	Total number 2005	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Angrier	30	46	39	54	0.19	
Bloodier	21	20	26	23	0.06	
Busier	63	91	63	94	0.04	
Crazier	7	18	8	21	0.00	
Emptier	16	12	18	15	0.08	
Funnier	78	121	78	125	0.05	
Happier	419	673	420	682	0.03	
Healthier	178	379	197	379	1.25	
Heavier	335	234	335	234	0.00	
Hungrier	15	27	17	33	0.06	
Lazier	9	8	9	9	0.06	
Luckier	69	44	70	45	0.00	
Nastier	50	54	50	59	0.20	
Noisier	16	25	18	28	0.00	
Prettier	31	66	31	67	0.00	
Quirkier	6	28	9	30	0.56	
Reader	25	16	62	38	0.02	
Tastier	17	20	18	21	0.00	
Trickier	31	111	41	126	0.57	

Table 2b. Disyllabic words ending in *-y*. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990-91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990-91	Total number 2005	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Angriest	12	23	15	31	0.04	
Bloodiest	50	57	52	60	0.00	
Busiest	170	226	170	227	0.00	
Craziest	9	15	9	17	0.09	
Emptiest	8	3	8	3		
Funniest	89	188	89	188	0.00	
Happiest	257	224	258	224	0.00	
Healthiest	35	47	44	51	0.44	
Heaviest	200	135	200	136	0.00	
Hungriest	3	9	3	9		
Laziest	4	14	4	15		
Luckiest	34	39	34	39	0.00	
Nastiest	30	38	30	38	0.00	
Noisiest	15	23	16	23	0.04	
Prettiest	42	81	42	81	0.00	
Quirkiest	5	6	5	6	0.00	
Readiest	5	2	7	4		
Tastiest	5	17	5	18		
Trickiest	24	33	27	40	0.08	

4.3. Disyllabic adjectives ending in *-ly*

The adjectives in Tables 3a and 3b vary considerably, as *likely* is mostly compared analytically, whereas the others are usually inflected. As usual, there are exceptions:

Rooney's arrival makes it likelier than ever that Owen will break the England scoring record. (2005)

However, *lovelier* has shifted from synthetic to analytic comparison and the change is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), and *likely* has become more analytic in the superlative

($p < 0.10$). Leech and Culpeper (1997: 361) found that the adjectives in this group had shifted in the analytic direction from 1961 to the 1980s and the early 1990s.

Table 3a. Disyllabic words ending in *-ly*. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Friendlier	39	48	66	70	0.48	
Likelier	22	43	1635	2373	1.30	
Lonelier	7	12	13	17	0.33	
Lovelier	10	5	12	18	4.44	< 0.050
Uglier	19	30	24	33	0.22	

Table 3b. Disyllabic words ending in *-ly*. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Friendliest	10	15	16	21	0.11	
Likeliest	71	61	671	798	3.50	< 0.100
Loneliest	14	15	16	15	0.13	
Loveliest	37	47	41	52	0.00	
Ugliest	38	53	43	57	0.06	

4.4. Disyllabic adjectives ending in *-er*, *-ere* and *-ure*

Tables 4a and 4b show that inflected forms of *obscure*, *mature* and *secure* are highly infrequent, but they still exist:

No sooner did Dot come into money than the vulpine Nick leaped out of a trapdoor saying he had been born again in Wormwood Scrubs and quoting at length from the obscurer books of the Old Testament. (1990–91)

The ending *-ure* is not mentioned in all grammars. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1584) ‘allow’ synthetic comparison of *demure* but not of *secure*. I found four examples of inflected comparisons for *secure*, but none for *demure* and hardly any analytic forms of that word either. Also inflected forms of *sober* were highly infrequent (one example) as were the comparatives *bitterer*, *severer* and *sincerer*. Two examples of *bitterer* in the 2005 corpus were excluded, as they were quotations from Charles Dickens. Although *clever* is the only adjective in this group that is normally inflected in the comparative, inflected superlatives in this group are on the whole more frequent. Superlative comparisons of *severe* have shifted in the analytic direction; the change is highly significant statistically ($p < 0.005$).

Table 4a. Disyllabic words ending in *-er, -ere, -ure*. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990-91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990-91	Total number 2005	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Bitterer	1	0	24	22		
Cleverer	41	82	51	85	0.91	
Maturer	5	1	82	119		
Obscurer	2	0	28	38		
Securer	3	1	114	101		
Severer	3	0	114	75		
Sincerer	2	0	5	5		
Soberer	1	0	46	35		
Tenderer	2	1	15	8		

Table 4b. Disyllabic words ending in *-er, -ere, -ure*. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990-91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990-91	Total number 2005	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Bitterest	34	32	75	55	1.03	
Cleverest	37	50	38	51	0.00	
Maturest	0	0	13	15		
Obscurest	0	0	6	14		
Securest	2	1	20	13		
Severest	48	15	104	76	8.76	< 0.005
Sincerest	15	14	23	18	0.23	
Soberest	0	0	2	3		
Tenderest	6	9	8	12	0.00	

4.5. Disyllabic adjectives ending in *-ow*

Tables 5a and 5b are very small. *Yellow, sallow* and *hollow* were seldom compared and therefore excluded.

Table 5a. Disyllabic words ending in *-ow*. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990-91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990-91	Total number 2005	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Mellower	11	14	22	25	0.08	
Narrower	141	74	145	78	0.03	
Shallower	15	25	16	26	0.01	

We see that the adjectives in this group are more often than not compared with endings.

Table 5b. Disyllabic words ending in *-ow*. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990-91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990-91	Total number 2005	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Mellowest	1	3	2	3		
Narrowest	61	55	65	55	0.12	
Shallowest	4	2	5	2		

There are no statistically significant changes here.

4.6. Disyllabic adjectives ending in *-le*

In Tables 6a and 6b all but two adjectives, *able* and *subtle*, are mostly inflected. A rare comparison of *able* is

Run-of-the-mill products of famous schools and Oxbridge are still quite frequently given jobs and chances that are denied to abler people from other backgrounds. (1990–91)

Inflected comparatives of *subtle* have decreased from 37% to 26%. The change is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 6a. Disyllabic words ending in *-le*. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Abler	5	1	49	64		
Gentler	145	132	159	152	0.17	
Humbler	38	30	47	49	1.30	
Nobler	19	15	23	25	0.86	
Simpler	281	400	296	410	0.12	
Subtler	68	49	184	192	3.95	< 0.050

Table 6b. Disyllabic words ending in *-le*. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Ablest	11	5	52	53	2.37	< 0.250
Gentlest	18	19	20	26	0.40	
Humblest	15	13	16	19	0.70	
Noblest	20	25	29	34	0.05	
Simplest	231	235	238	244	0.01	
Subtlest	10	14	27	30	0.31	

Ablest has become less frequent, but here $p < 0.25$. *Fickle* was too rare to be included in this study; in both corpora together, 9 analytic forms were found, but no synthetic. We see that *simple* is highly inflectional, contradicting Barber's claim that this adjective is 'usually' compared with *more* and *most* (1997: 146).

4.7. Other disyllabic adjectives

We see in Tables 7a and 7b that inflected forms of *tired* and *solid* are rare; so are *handsomer* and *profounder*. *Wicked* and *minute* are seldom used in the comparative. *Quiet* is highly inflectional, contradicting Barber, who claims that this adjective 'usually' takes phrasal comparison (1997: 146). The changes for *profoundest* are highly significant statistically ($p < 0.01$), significant for *commoner* ($p < 0.05$), and for *commonest* and *remotest* we have $p < 0.25$ in both cases. All four changes are in the analytic direction. The changes for *common* agree with the observations by Leech and Culpeper (1997: 371) and Barber (1997: 146),

saying that inflected forms of *common* have become less common. Earlier, Gabrielson (1964: 87) stated that *common* usually took endings. On the other hand, *crueller* (including *crueler*) has become more frequent, though not significantly ($p < 0.25$). Barber (1997: 146) claims that *cruel* is usually compared analytically, but the data in this study contradict this.

Table 7a. Other disyllabic words. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Commoner	10	3	87	88	3.85	< 0.050
Crueller	15	19	24	20	1.49	< 0.250
Handsomer	3	2	10	11		
Minuter	0	1	0	1		
Pleasanter	9	4	35	29	1.11	
Politer	3	2	10	26		
Profounder	4	2	72	72		
Quieter	156	216	160	223	0.00	
Remoter	18	18	66	68	0.01	
Solider	0	0	45	56		
Stupider	3	10	11	25		
Tireder	0	2	5	17		
Wickedder	0	0	3	1		

Table 7b. Other disyllabic words. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Commonest	56	41	364	370	2.57	< 0.250
Cruellest	59	56	65	60	0.02	
Handsomest	7	4	14	9		
Minutest	8	3	8	6		
Pleasantest	5	3	16	16		
Politest	11	6	14	9	0.11	
Profoundest	10	3	32	48	7.38	< 0.010
Quietest	43	61	43	61	0.00	
Remotest	61	67	75	104	1.74	< 0.250
Solidest	0	2	11	8		
Stupidest	5	28	13	51	0.54	
Tiredest	2	0	3	3		
Wickedest	8	1	11	3		

Biber *et al.* (1999: 523) have attested the following forms but regard them as exceptional: *artfullest*, *alivest*, *boringest*, *cursedest*, *darlingest*, *extremest*, *exactest*, *honestest*, *intensest*, *raggediest*, *solemnest* and *vulgarest*. In this study one occurrence of *darlingest* was found in the 2005 corpus and one of *extremest* in each corpus, but the latter is a Shakespeare quotation. The earlier example reads:

It was a matter of the extremest gravity to impugn the Home Secretary's decision on rationality grounds where questions of national security were concerned. (1990–91)

The remaining 10 forms never occurred. Biber *et al.* also place *handsomer*, *profounder*, *profoundest*, *stupidest* and *wickedest* into the same group, but these forms are more frequent. Earlier, Gabrielson (1964: 87) had stated that *handsome* was usually compared with endings, though this is not supported by the data. In the case of *stupid*, inflection is ‘allowed,’ according to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1584); in the 2005 corpus it was compared synthetically 55% of the time in the superlative. Nor was *wickedest* uncommon in the corpora examined. Among the grammars investigated, only Svartvik and Sager (1996: 279) discuss *solid*. They state that it is sometimes inflected, but I found no case of *solider* and only two cases of *solidest*, one of which occurred in the following:

It marginalised some of the worst centralising political impulses of the past; but it made practical improvements too and retained much of the economic strength that is the solidest basis for European cooperation. (2005)

Although inflected forms of *remote* are not infrequent, this adjective is not mentioned in the grammars examined. *Remotest* is even more frequent than *most remote* in both corpora. Also a few synthetic forms of *untrue*, *unfair* and *unkind* were found:

Seldom was an untruer word spoken. (1990–91)

This shows that disyllabic adjectives beginning with *un-* can be inflected.

4.8. Trisyllabic adjectives

In Tables 8a and 8b most inflected forms are highly infrequent, with the exception of *unhappiest* and *unlikeliest*. According to Biber *et al.* (1999: 522) *shadowy* can take endings, but seldom does, and the superlative *almightiest* may occur. These forms were not found; nor were inflected forms of *sensible*, which Mondorf (2003: 257) calls ‘acceptable.’ However, we clearly see that trisyllabic adjectives can be inflected, despite Gabrielson’s claim to the contrary (1964: 86). Svartvik and Sager (1996) do not discuss trisyllabic adjectives.

Table 8a. Trisyllabic words. Comparatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Beautifuler	0	0	37	69		
Slipperier	1	0	4	6		
Uneasier	2	0	7	4		
Unfriendlier	1	0	3	0		
Unhappier	6	6	7	17		
Unhealthier	1	4	3	6		
Unlikelier	0	3	22	32		

Table 8b. Trisyllabic words. Superlatives. Numbers and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Beautifullest	3	0	179	141		
Slippiest	0	2	2	4		
Uneasiest	1	0	2	0		
Unfriendliest	0	0	2	4		
Unhappiest	9	7	13	16	0.84	
Unhealthiest	5	4	9	6		
Unlikeliest	22	31	88	132	0.05	

Five of the seven trisyllabic adjectives begin with *un-*, which is in accordance with the rule given by Quirk *et al.*, saying that trisyllabic adjectives can be inflected if beginning with *-un*, but they also state that other trisyllabic adjectives cannot take endings and give *beautifullest* as an example of an impossible comparison (1985: 462). All three examples of this form were found in the same article. Two of them are headlines and the third is an extract from a book.⁵ The example from the extract is

As Ruby’s son Larry, 12 at the time, says: ‘I thought that was the beautifullest place in the world. [’] (1990–91)

Another example of an inflected trisyllabic adjective not beginning in *-un* is

The current demonising of an entire community is so shocking we are going to have to vote for a party led by a man we believe to be the slippiest, most profoundly disliked politician to hold the office of prime minister in our lifetime. (2005)

No changes are statistically significant in this group.

⁵ The book was written by Nicholas Lemann and published in New York in 1991. Also the title indicates that this is an American book: *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. Since the example was found in a British newspaper, I still included it. The headlines were ‘The beautifullest place in the world.’

4.9. Summary of the χ^2 -test

Only five forms have changed comparison between 1990–91 and 2005 with $p < 0.05$: *severest*, *profoundest*, *lovelier*, *subtler* and *commoner*, of which the changes for the two superlatives are highly significant statistically ($p < 0.005$ and $p < 0.010$, respectively). With $p < 0.25$ *crueller* has become more frequent, but all the other changes are in the analytic direction, see Table 9. The only adjective that has changed its way of indicating comparison in both the comparative and the superlative is *common*, but the changes for the superlative are not statistically significant ($p < 0.25$).

Table 9. Statistically significant changes. Number of occurrences and results of the χ^2 -test

Word	Inflected forms 1990–91	Inflected forms 2005	Total number 1990–91	Total number 2005	χ^2	p
Severest	48	15	104	76	8.76	< 0.005
Profoundest	10	3	32	48	7.38	< 0.010
Lovelier	10	5	12	18	4.44	< 0.050
Subtler	68	49	184	192	3.95	< 0.050
Commoner	10	3	87	88	3.85	< 0.050
Likeliest	71	61	671	798	3.50	< 0.100
Commonest	56	41	364	370	2.57	< 0.250
Ablest	11	5	53	52	2.14	< 0.250
Remotest	61	67	75	104	1.74	< 0.250
Crueller	15	19	24	20	1.49	< 0.250

5. DISCUSSION

A good grammar should be accurate and useful. Since modern grammars mostly write ‘in general,’ ‘often,’ ‘seldom’ and ‘sometimes’ instead of ‘always’ and ‘never,’ it is hard to say that they are wrong. Nevertheless, when a form is hardly ever used (*solider, soberer*), the word ‘sometimes’ is not the most suitable, and when an adjective is inflected more than 50% of the time (*stupid* and *remote* in the superlative), this fact should be mentioned. The most accurate of the grammars used in this investigation are the vaguest: Greenbaum (1996) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). The latter writes: ‘Many adjectives allow both types, many others only the analytic type, and a few only the inflectional’ (p. 1582). This is true, but it is not useful, especially not for a learner of English. The opposite is Biber *et al.* (1999), which is corpus-based and very detailed, perhaps too detailed, since many rare forms were not found in this investigation of two British newspapers from three different years, although the total number of words exceeds 86 million. It is open for discussion whether grammars should describe everything that may occur in the language, or just describe the normal usage.

The oldest grammar (Gabrielson 1964) is out of date in some cases, but the general rules still hold quite well. When it comes to the grammar used at Karlstad University (Svartvik and Sager 1996), it is reasonably representative. However, the claim that disyllabic adjectives ending in *-ure*, as in *obscure*, are ‘often’ inflected is too strong according to the data, and the grammar should mention *stupid, remote, profound, unhappy* and *unlikely*, rather than *solid*, as adjectives that are sometimes inflected. As for monosyllabic adjectives, the grammar should consider more exceptions. The general rule about degree modifiers suggested by Leech and Culpeper (see above, p. 6) is also important. Several examples of analytic comparison after degree modifiers (*much, a bit, a little* etc.) are given in Appendix 1. Other general rules suggested by Mondorf (2003) may be interesting, but the space in a general grammar aiming to describe the whole language is more limited than in an article focusing on adjective comparison; Svartvik and Sager use 2 pages, whereas Mondorf uses 48 pages.

As to whether or not change is taking place in comparison formation, the null-hypothesis (meaning that there are no statistically significant changes) holds for all but five forms. In many other cases there were changes, but those adjectives were either too infrequent for the χ^2 -test to be reliable, or the probability that the observed change was owing to chance was greater than 5%. The likeliest reason why so few statistically significant changes were found

is, as I see it, that the 14–15 year period examined was too short; Leech and Culpeper studied changes during a period of 25–30 years.

Kytö and Romaine (1997, 2000) showed that the inflectional comparatives were more frequent in 1900–1950 than in 1950–1990, but the superlatives had shifted towards synthetic comparison. Since they have studied all adjectives and I only some, our results are not comparable, but at least it is clear from my data that the superlatives are more often inflected than the comparatives are (see the percentage tables in Appendix 2), a result that agrees with earlier research (Lindquist 1998; Kytö & Romaine 2000). However, many analytic comparatives occur before *than* or after degree modifiers, constructions in which superlatives cannot occur. In the 2005 corpus the following adjectives were mostly compared with *more* in the comparative and with *–est* in the superlative: *lovely*, *bitter*, *tender*, *sincere*, *stupid*, *wicked*, *remote* and *polite*. The opposite case (mostly *–er* in the comparative and *most* in the superlative) never occurred. This indicates that the superlatives may be the last to shift towards analytic comparison.

The changes in adjective comparison are sometimes seen as a part of the development of English from a synthetic to an analytic language. Nevertheless, there are changes in the opposite direction; one is the 's-genitive, which nowadays quite often is used with inanimate nouns like *car* as in the following example:

But carmakers clearly believe they have a future. Among them is Toyota, whose hybrids, such as the Prius, contain an electric-battery pack recharged when the car's brakes are applied. (2005)

I think such a construction was rare fifty years ago: it would have been *the brakes of the car*. I conclude that the future of English is not easy to predict.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The periphrastic forms of adjectives were introduced in the thirteenth century, and by the end of the sixteenth century, they had become as frequent as they are today. In Early Modern English analytic comparison of monosyllabic adjectives was quite frequent and there were many inflected forms of polysyllabic adjectives that now have disappeared, although *beautifullest*, *slipperier*, *slipperiest* and *extremest* were found in the corpora examined. However, the direction of the changes in comparison has shifted through the centuries.

In contemporary British English the comparison of adjectives varies considerably. At least some of the examples show that many adjectives are not compared with endings, even if one would expect them to be, as the grammars state. The adjectives *apt*, *sure*, *likely*, *sober*, *solid*, *mature*, *secure* and *obscure* were often compared analytically, contrary to what some grammars state, so they are somewhat misleading.⁶ In the cases of *just* and *fickle*, the total number of occurrences is small, so no conclusions can be drawn. Moreover, the adjectives *stupid*, *remote*, *profound*, *unhappy* and *unlikely* were quite often inflected, but no grammar mentions all of them.

As for recent research, Barber's claim from 1997 that *cruel*, *simple* and *quiet* are usually compared with *more* and *most* is indeed contradicted by the data in this study. Leech and Culpeper, followed by Mondorf, show that the rules based on syntax and morphology in the grammars are not enough; the reasons why speakers choose one or the other form to express comparison are related to all core fields of linguistics: syntax, morphology, semantics, phonology and pragmatics.

Only five forms have changed comparison between 1990–91 and 2005 with the error probability $p < 0.05$: *severest*, *profoundest*, *subtler*, *lovelier* and *commoner*, of which the changes for the two superlatives are highly significant statistically ($p < 0.005$ and $p < 0.010$, respectively). All five adjectives have become more analytic. The only adjective that has changed its way of indicating comparison in both the comparative and the superlative is *common*, but the changes for the superlative are not statistically significant ($p < 0.25$). As mentioned above, the likeliest reason why there were no more significant changes is probably that the period studied was too short. However, one observation can be made: it is clear that superlatives in general are more often inflected than comparatives. Eight adjectives in the 2005 corpus were mostly analytic in the comparative and mostly synthetic in the superlative.

⁶ Not all adjectives are mentioned, but according to the grammar rules more inflected forms could be expected.

I have had three aims with this paper: firstly, to examine how adjectives in English are compared today; secondly, to determine how well the descriptions of adjective comparison in modern grammars agree with authentic written English; thirdly, to see whether there have been any recent changes in the way of indicating comparison. The first aim was the hardest to fulfil, since I only examined newspapers and there were many more adjectives that I could have included, although I did examine many common adjectives that vary in their way of indicating comparison. Nevertheless, newspapers contain texts of many different types and are therefore reasonably representative of the written language. When it comes to the grammars, I chose six from 1964–2002, both in Swedish and in English, so the number should be enough. As for the third aim, changes can be studied for individual adjectives, for groups of adjectives, or for all adjectives. I believe that the method I chose is preferable, since the frequencies of adjectives vary considerably, so that the common adjectives tend to skew the results for the group. Furthermore, the results of an investigation of a group depend on the choice of adjectives, unless all are included. In addition to focusing on individual adjectives, I highly recommend using a statistical method such as the χ^2 -test when undertaking this type of study.

This has been a quantitative study. For further research I suggest that a qualitative investigation should be conducted, wherein especially the general rule about degree modifiers should be taken into consideration (when an adjective is preceded by words like *even*, *far* and *a whole lot* it tends to be compared with *more*: ‘a bit more nice’). Also some of Mondorf’s claims, for example about rare adjectives being likelier to be analytically compared, deserve an investigation. Another suggestion is a synchronic study. Lindquist found that American English might be ahead of British English in the shift towards analytic comparison. His study is now ten years old and a new one would be interesting. Furthermore, Lindquist studied only disyllabic adjectives ending in *-y* and *-ly*. Finally, language changes usually appear in speech before they are seen in writing, so a corpus of spoken English would be worth a study.

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APPENDIX 1: RARE COMPARISONS FOUND IN THE CORPORA

Here are some rare comparisons in alphabetical order (my emphasis in all cases):

It could not have happened on an apter day. (1990–91)

‘She does not suffer, thank God it is much bitterer and harder to bear than I expected... I thought for some time she was sinking, but now she has rallied a little... Poor Annie has just said “Papa” quite distinctly.’ (1990–91)

Even more bold than the jewel-coloured cardigans was the rainwear, which was patterned in the distinctive Burberry check. (2005)

If I, as a GP, find a better way of meeting people’s needs, I simply become more busy. (2005)

Low levels correlate with depression, which in turn is commoner among poor people and women (who, in general, are twice as likely to be depressed). (2005)

I’ll be raising a glass to us all – and a couple of refills, of course, to the onliest, darlingest Dolly. (2005)

Here is what Ostrovsky wrote to Stalin in 1935: ‘Dear beloved Comrade Stalin! I want to address you – our leader and teacher, the most dear human being for me.’ (2005)

The reality is rather more dull. (2005)

Failure is funny – much more funny than just rolling your eyes at the antics of men – and it is so refreshing to see women taking centre stage, clowning around and falling on their metaphorical arses. (2005)

As you know, the Liberal Democrats are proud of being the most green of all the major parties. (2005)

He added: ‘On a personal level, with Sarah I have never been more happy, and on a professional basis I have never felt more personally fulfilled. Our opportunity is great.’ (2005)

I have a bit of a hopeless crush on C&J (I love them, they love each other; it’s all a bloody mess, frankly) who are even funnier and handsomer and, yes, taller in the flesh (she gushed). (2005)

‘We were very poor first half. Second half, better, but we’ll look at that as two points dropped. They looked more hungry than us. You would have thought it was them trying to get in the Premiership and not us and that’s disappointing.’ (2005)

The United Nations was founded 60 years ago to reflect the noblest ideals of the democracies that came together to defeat fascism and build a juster world. (2005)

So he wrote a story about adapting it, including such conceits as a fictitious twin brother, Donald, who represents Hollywood at its most lazy and obvious – he went as far as sharing the writing credit and real – life Oscar nomination with his phantom sibling. (2005)

‘I was more lucky than most. I found two – Big Duncan and George. I suppose in their own ways, they both died, didn’t they?’ (2005)

Frequent sowings through summer allow us to enjoy young beetroot (globe types have a better flavour than cylindrical) for many weeks, and whether baked in foil for an hour or boiled, they are incomparably sweeter than maturer roots. (2005)

But it was a pleasanter billet than at many EU summits. (2005)

Read Dickens to see if people were really nicer or politer. (2005)

Gudjohnsen played a vital role as Kezman restored Chelsea's lead before Ricardo Carvalho was the beneficiary of more poor Norwich defending to head the third goal from a corner. (2005)

'I think it's interesting because [gender] has an effect on what you produce. I think a male palate is different from a female one, which is more veggie and more pretty.' (2005; The comment in square brackets is not mine.)

What happened, moreover, should have a profounder outcome. (1990–91)

His life, he reflects sadly, near the end of the book 'seems no realer than the lives on TV shows,' except that his is not interrupted every six minutes by commercial breaks. (1990–91)

Which is how come I accidentally asked her the most rude and maladroit of questions as we were talking about not having children. (2005)

And when you can hire dummies to bring it [the heroin] over as mules, time after time it's far more safe than jumping over Post Office counters and these days you get shot for doing that. (1990–91; The comment in square brackets is mine.)

In the ballet and film scores, the Lincoln Portrait and the Third Symphony his own character shines forth as clearly as in the earlier, severer works. (1990–91)

There is no love sincerer than the love of food. (1990–91)

'Life is short,' he says suddenly. We've been working, over the Assam, in the 'self-unfolding chronology' of biography but 'time is... slipperier.' (1990–91)

And the Blind Daters duly return from Tenerife or Barnstable soberer than when they set out, cured, ready to resume the more familiar business of displeasure. (1990–91)

But Siza's mastery lies in subtler qualities such as context, spatial relationships and use of light. (2005)

Seafood main courses are a little more tame here than in The Bridge, Brown's other, city centre venture, and presentation can be a little hurried, but their bracing Morecambe Bay brown shrimp and cockle chowder is a pink-hued delight, while monkfish is brought to vibrant life with some dense fennel jus. (2005)

Instead try the much less cliched and much more tasty Frites Flagey, near the hip Cafe Belga and the venue Flagey, a cinema and concert hall. (2005)

I live in a really noisy place and am getting tireder and tireder. (2005)

Returning to Leeds, judging by this evidence, Lukic will discover that central defending is an uneasier business. (1990–91)

Even as Britain prepares to chair the G8 group of industrialised nations and assume the presidency of the EU, and government officials talk up the potential for political breakthroughs to help Africa and reduce debt, some of the very development groups that helped set up the Fairtrade Foundation argue that the global trading system is actually getting unfairer. (2005)

But, then, Sir Robert asked a rather unfriendlier question. (1990–91)

People on the Grangetown estate, on Teesside, are said to be the unhealthiest in Britain. (1990–91)

His sense of humour is selective, he is not one for telling jokes, but he has a nice line in self-deprecatory one-liners that might deflect the unkinder barbs. (1990–91)

The bookies rate only PSV Eindhoven and Porto as unlikelier winners of the competition this season, though the Dutch are top of their domestic championship and the Portuguese are the holders. (2005)

APPENDIX 2: PERCENTAGE TABLES

In the following tables I have put rare forms (expected values less than 5) within round brackets. Changes that are statistically significant, at least with $p < 0.25$, are marked in the tables. When the total number of occurrences is zero, the entry is left blank, since then the percentages cannot be calculated.

Table 10. Monosyllabic words. Percentages.

<i>Word</i>	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	<i>1990-91</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>1990-91</i>	<i>2005</i>
Nice	100	100	100	100
Poor	100	100	100	100
Rude	100	100	100	96
Safe	100	99	100	99
Soft	100	99	100	100
Dry	100	96	100	58
Pale	100	96	100	96
Fond	100	85	94	91
Sharp	99	99	100	100
Calm	99	96	100	100
Green	98	94	100	97
Fair	97	98	95	97
Smooth	96	98	100	100
Clear	96	98	99	99
Bold	95	99	98	98
Rare	95	94	95	97
Dull	94	97	100	100
Straight	94	82	100	100
Sad	92	94	100	100
Tame	90	86	100	100
Brave	88	95	97	97
Pure	88	94	95	94
Grey	88	88	100	100
Sick	87	77	100	88
Sure	81	65	96	94
Keen	80	85	93	86
Free	78	79	(74)	(67)
Vague	76	75	100	94
True	68	68	86	96
(Shy)	50	73	100	50
Blunt	48	67	(100)	(100)
(Apt)	11	0	9	0
(Just)	3	9	0	0
(Real)	2	3	50	33

Table 11. Disyllabic words ending in *-y*. Percentages.

Word	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	1990-91	2005	1990-91	2005
Busy	100	97	100	100
Funny	100	97	100	100
Happy	100	99	100	100
Heavy	100	100	100	92
Lazy	100	89	(100)	(93)
Nasty	100	92	100	100
Pretty	100	99	100	100
Lucky	99	98	100	100
Tasty	94	95	(100)	(94)
Healthy	90	100	80	92
Empty	89	80	(100)	(100)
Noisy	89	89	94	100
Crazy	88	86	100	88
Hungry	88	84	(100)	(100)
Bloody	81	87	94	95
Angry	77	85	80	74
Tricky	76	88	89	83
Quirky	67	93	100	100
Ready	40	42	(71)	(50)

Table 12. Disyllabic words ending in *-ly*. Percentages.

Word	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	1990-91	2005	1990-91	2005
Lovely	83	28	90	90
Ugly	79	91	88	93
Friendly	59	69	63	71
Lonely	54	71	88	100
Likely	1	2	10	8

Table 13. Disyllabic words ending in *-er, -ere, -ure*. Percentages.

Word	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	1990-91	2005	1990-91	2005
Clever	80	96	97	98
Sincere	(40)	(0)	65	78
Tender	13	13	75	75
(Obscure)	7	0	0	0
(Mature)	6	1	0	0
Bitter	(4)	(0)	45	58
Severe	(3)	(0)	46	20
Secure	(3)	(1)	10	8
(Sober)	2	0	0	0

Table 14. Disyllabic words ending in *-ow*. Percentages.

Word	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	1990-91	2005	1990-91	2005
Narrow	97	95	94	100
Shallow	94	96	80	100
Mellow	50	56	50	100

Table 15. Disyllabic words ending in *-le*. Percentages.

Word	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	1990-91	2005	1990-91	2005
Simple	95	95	97	96
Noble	83	60	69	74
Humble	81	61	94	68
Gentle	75	87	90	73
Subtle	37	26	37	47
Able	(11)	(2)	21	10

Table 16. Other Disyllabic Words. Percentages.

Word	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	1990-91	2005	1990-91	2005
Quiet	98	97	100	100
Cruel	63	95	91	93
Polite	30	8	79	67
Handsome	(30)	(18)	50	44
Remote	27	26	81	64
Stupid	27	40	38	55
Pleasant	26	14	31	19
Common	11	3	15	11
Profound	(6)	(3)	31	6
Wicked	(0)	(0)	73	67
(Tired)	0	12	67	0
(Solid)	0	0	0	25
(Minute)		100	100	50

Table 17. Trisyllabic words. Percentages.

Word	<i>-er</i>		<i>-est</i>	
	1990-91	2005	1990-91	2005
Unhappy	(86)	(35)	69	44
(Unhealthy)	33	67	56	67
(Unfriendly)	33		0	0
(Uneasy)	29	0	50	
(Slippery)	25	0	0	50
Unlikely	(0)	(9)	20	23
(Beautiful)	0	0	2	0

APPENDIX 3: CALCULATION METHODS

This algorithm was used for the χ^2 -test (we call 1990–91 year 1 and 2005 year 2):

Input: o_1 , t_1 , o_2 and t_2 (observed values, o_1 and o_2 , which are numbers of synthetic forms, and the total numbers of occurrences in the two corpora, t_1 and t_2).

Let $\Sigma_o = o_1 + o_2$ and $\Sigma_t = t_1 + t_2$ (sums).

Let $\pi_1 = t_1/\Sigma_t$ and $\pi_2 = t_2/\Sigma_t$ (proportions).

Let $e_1 = \pi_1 \cdot \Sigma_o$ and $e_2 = \pi_2 \cdot \Sigma_o$ (expected values).

$$\text{Output: } \chi^2 = \frac{(o_1 - e_1)^2}{e_1} + \frac{(o_2 - e_2)^2}{e_2}.$$

The following example shows how the calculations were made. There are 10 occurrences of *commoner* and 77 of *more common* in the 1990–91 corpus, and 3 occurrences of *commoner* and 85 of *more common* in the 2005 corpus. We get $o_1 = 10$, $o_2 = 3$ and $t_1 = 87$, $t_2 = 88$. Summing the values, we get $\Sigma_o = 10 + 3 = 13$ and $\Sigma_t = 87 + 88 = 175$. Calculating the proportions, we get $\pi_1 = 87/175 = 0.497$ and $\pi_2 = 88/175 = 0.503$. These values are multiplied by $\Sigma_o = 13$ and we get the expected values $e_1 = 6.46$ and $e_2 = 6.54$. Finally, we get $\chi^2 = 3.84$, which means that the error probability $p < 0.05$, after having looked up the χ^2 value in a table, so the probability that the change is owing to chance is less than 5%. It is to be noted that the values e_1 and e_2 do not have to be integers, since they are the expected values when the null-hypothesis is true. As they are not less than 5 in this case (6.46 and 6.54), the test can be applied.