

“*MORE STRENGER AND MIGHTIER*”: SOME REMARKS ON DOUBLE
COMPARISON IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The marginal participation of double comparison¹, like *more nicer*, in adjective gradation in historical and contemporary English has been corroborated by numerical evidence (Kytö and Romaine 1997, 2000; González-Díaz 2004, 2006a). The studies in question, however, failed to address some data limitations and their distorting impact on the picture of real language use. Although this omission may seem less striking regarding the historical sources, it nevertheless calls for an immediate remedy. Also, the alleged marginal participation of the construction in adjective gradation, as well as its grounds, require thorough verification. What cannot be ignored, is the fact that a clear contradiction exists between the disappearance of double comparison from standard English and its popularity and persistence in colloquial speech and manifold nonstandard varieties of English and other genetically related languages. In other words, even though in the analysed data, the appearance of double comparison in English appears to be as abrupt as is its demise, its ubiquity outside the standard varieties points to a continuous development not reflected in the surviving record or the analysed contemporary corpora. With a view to this, this paper aims at an analysis based on data (so far excluded from investigations) representing the period of the highest incidence of the construction, i.e. Middle English. Also, bearing in mind the limitations of historical record, apart from synchronically- or diachronically-oriented explanations, the study proposes resorting to some externally-oriented explanations (cf. Good, forthcoming).

The paper is structured in the following way: Section 1 is devoted to some preliminaries pertaining to comparative constructions, including selected findings of previous investigations into the development of adjective comparison in

¹ The study focuses on double comparatives (DCs) with *more* excluding (1) suppletive double forms (*worser, lesser*) as an irregular category requiring a separate treatment (Schlüter 2001); (2) superlative forms, as in this case, the intensifying meaning is easily confused with superlative meaning (gradation proper).

English. Section 2 is devoted to the externally-oriented explanations of gradation choices proposed in the existing research and introduces a further, new explanation. Section 3 is devoted to the presentation and discussion of the analysed data and the empirical verification of the proposed theoretical approach from Section 2.

1. Double comparison – some preliminaries

Comparison may be defined as a “mental act by which two objects are assigned a position on a predicative scale” (Stassen 2001: 993). One of the typological parameters of comparative constructions is predicate marking. English is among the few languages which use an overt marking on the predicative adjective. This typological feature is limited to Europe and coincides with the presence of a comparative particle (*than* in English). The case of English (and other genetically-related languages) is special in that both existing types of overt marking, i.e. by means of an affix as well as a special adverb (Stassen 2001: 995), are allowed. Moreover, English, as well as other Indo-European languages (e.g., colloquial Spanish and French), in addition, allows double (pleonastic) marking in which both the affix and the adverb are used for a single predicate in constructions of the *more easier* type.

Double comparison (henceforth DC) is, moreover, a standard feature of non-standard grammars in the English dialects throughout Britain (Edwards and Weltens 1985: 117) and the whole English-speaking world (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998: 337). Viewed as a distinctive characteristic of the American variant by Mencken in the 1920's (1921: 262), it is presently associated with vernaculars such as e.g., Appalachian English² or AAVE. Furthermore, Romaine provides evidence for its presence in the English-based pidgins and creoles of the Atlantic and the Pacific (2005: 492-3). For the English vernacular varieties in general, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) notice that the distribution of this and some other features (e.g., double negation) is determined by social status differences. DC also appears in the checklist of non-standard features for transported varieties of English (Hickey 2005: 608). The above facts shed some light on the results of research based on contemporary corpora. For instance, *CIC*³ of national English in the UK and US, compiled of standard and

² Wolfram and Schilling-Estes claim that in historically isolated varieties like this one, “vernacular word-formation processes may involve complications ... and vernacular speakers may sometimes use inflectional endings where they are not strictly “needed” just to ensure that meanings are clear” (1998: 77).

³ The *Cambridge International Corpus* in total contains c. 200 million words. The British part totals 101.9 million words, of which 83 percent are written texts and 17

largely written data, does not contain more than a negligible number of doubly marked adjectives (one instance in the spoken and several in the written corpus; Algeo 2006: 130) in its British section, while no double comparatives occur in the American one. The validity of this numerical evidence does not, however, hold beyond the standard varieties of English in the two countries.

1.1. A diachronic overview

The above observations are not without consequence for the discussion of the development of DC in the history of English. An OE innovation (later 9th c.), it was introduced along with periphrastic comparison (henceforth PC⁴) most probably under the influence of Latin⁵ (but compare the arguments of González-Díaz 2006b supporting an internal development). The existing secondary sources reviewed by González-Díaz quote five OE examples of DC (2006b: 711):

- 1) micelle *ma wyrse* (LibSc 109)
‘more worse’
- 2) he *swiþor* ætforan him sylfum *eadmodra* bið (ÆCHom i. 514)
‘more humbler’
- 3) hu miccle mae I *swiþor bettra* is monn (RUSHW)
‘more better’
- 4) *mare heare* (NICH)
‘more higher’
- 5) *ma hludre* (CHROD)
‘more louder’

The scarcity of the surviving OE examples contrasts with the ample distribution of DC in ME (e.g., Pound 1901: 53). It is claimed that Late ME was the time when the form peaked (along with PC; Mossé 1952: 92), which is corroborated by the surviving record analysed so far (cf. the findings in González-Díaz 2006a). One has to take into account, however, that the discontinuous representation in the historical record established by the previous studies may not so much reflect language usage but rather the growing uniformisation and standardisation pressures on later records. As far as EModE is concerned, particu-

percent spoken texts; the American corpus totals 96.1 million words, of which 77 percent are written texts and 23 percent spoken texts (Algeo 2006: 4).

⁴ Cf. a recent monograph by Janecka (2007) on dialect distribution of synthetic and periphrastic comparison in mediaeval English.

⁵ Mitchell views the first recorded OE example *micle ma wyrse* (*Liber Scintillarum* 109/7) as a calque of the Latin *quanto magis peius* (1985: 85).

larly well known is the presence of DC in Shakespeare, (e.g., Blake 2001) and there is evidence that DC was a feature of high style (González-Díaz 2004: 192). For instance, in Ben Jonson's 1640 *English grammar*⁶, it is viewed as "imitating the manner of most ancientest and finest Grecians". At the same time, however, other early modern grammarians (Greaves in 1594 and Butler in 1636) saw it as outdated or recommended its avoidance (Dons 2004: 56), indicating the decreasing acceptability of the form. DC was thus prevented from becoming part of standard English grammars by the standardisation-related preferences for uniformity of coding and economy. Those tendencies were effectively promoted by the English prescriptivist and purist tradition stigmatising pleonasm and tautology (cf. Kytö and Romaine 2000; Schlüter 2005: 68; but also González-Díaz 2004; Auer and González-Díaz 2005). Despite the standardization effects and the prescriptive and rationalising pressures in the 17th and 18th centuries⁷ and its absence from historical corpora after 1640 (Kytö and Romaine 1997), DC is evidenced, for instance, in the journals of Captain Cook, while its presence in the speech of the colonisers of the 19th century is also reflected in the English-lexicon creoles⁸ (Romaine 2005). The preservation of double comparison in those varieties of English, as well as in the English vernaculars all over the world, discloses the forced nature of its elimination from the English standards and undermines the redundancy or logic arguments used by those who aimed to stigmatise it.⁹

2. Externally-oriented explanations of gradation choices

The shortcomings of the existing data call for some support from externally-oriented explanations. Some findings in comparative and theoretical morphology might come in useful at this point. Since its appearance, DC has been an

⁶ The popularity and therefore the influence exerted by this work may have been considerable as it was the second grammar written in the English language (the first one was written by Bullokar in 1586) with the traditional orthography which made it a popular source for an average teacher (Dons 2004: 12).

⁷ Blake (2001: 9) notices that the editorial elimination of double comparison from Shakespeare's work occurs in mid-17th C in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th folios, but is less frequent in the 19th c.

⁸ Romaine notices *mobeta* dating from 1831 in Chinese Pidgin English and *more better* in New South Wales in 1826 (cf. Tok Pisin *mobeta*, Bislama *mobeta/mogud* 'preferable', Hawai'i Creole English *mobeta*) (2005: 492).

⁹ The reason for stigmatisation is either "linguistic corruption" or logical grounds (Díaz 2004: 198). The former type is illustrated by Greaves (1594) but it is dubitable whether his criticism refers to the double comparative or the lack of number agreement between noun and verb. For stigmatisation in the 18th c., cf. Kytö and Romaine (2000).

option in adjective gradation competing with the original Old English synthetic comparison as well as with the newer analytic form. As such, specific gradation choices may be explained in terms of users' motivations and may involve specific discourse functions. The situation of the competition of the three options for a single grammatical category was extended through ME and the available studies have shown that the PC and DC were most frequent in Late ME (Kytö and Romaine 2000; González-Díaz 2006a). This points to a conclusion that the two gradation options not only have a common origin (as an innovation DC is related to PC), but also common patterns of development. Obviously, given the nature of the data, the frequencies and relative distribution of the three variants may not be interpreted in a straightforward way. Still, some findings of studies into adjective comparison need to be incorporated in the discussion.

In her account of the appearance of PC in OE, González-Díaz hypothesises that "at some point (when synthetic forms were the only comparative strategy available in the language), speakers felt that inflectional forms did not clearly express the idea of degree and, therefore, they looked for a new way for doing so" (2006b: 732). She further proposes that "an old inflectional form (i.e. the comparative suffix *-er*) loses (part of) its expressive potential and a new, more emphatic and transparent periphrastic form is introduced in order to perform the same function" (2006b: 733). According to this line of reasoning, the following more formal representation may be arrived at:

[till c. 850 SYNTHETIC] *adj-re* → [post 850 ANALYTIC] *more adj-~~re~~*

One could take issue with this proposal to show its twofold fallacy. First of all, the above explanation is not supported by empirical evidence and bluntly ignores the facts established in some other diachronically-oriented studies. On the basis of historical corpora, Kytö and Romaine have shown that even in the period when the innovative form peaked (i.e. Late ME), it was still less frequent than the original form, with a 45% to 55% ratio¹⁰ (2000: 172). Despite the users' need for clarity and emphasis, the innovative comparative was thus never even the statistically preferred choice (as far as the surviving data shows), let alone its being completely ousted by the new form, as the proposal of González-Díaz may be taken to suggest. Secondly, the explanation of González-Díaz involves a theoretical problem. Assuming that the periphrastic form takes over the function of the inflectional marker, how is it possible for the latter to immediately disappear from the new construction, i.e. how feasible is it to accept two

¹⁰ It is also worth mentioning that some researchers (e.g., Kytö and Romaine 2000; Nevalainen 2006) claim that PC was initially a written variant, therefore the ratio of the new and old form may be biased to the advantage of the former.

simultaneous steps (*-er* disappearance and *more* insertion)? How, at the same time, does the inflectional comparative ending continue its existence as a fully functional marker for the analytic comparison? The immediate decline of *-er* in the light of González-Díaz's proposal would be feasible if it was consistent with the demise of the inflectional comparison. The available facts as to the development of adjective comparison in the history of English point, however, to two different "lives" of *-er* following the periphrastic innovation: one as the fully functional marker of inflectional comparison, and the other as a redundant one in DC. Consequently, the derivation proposed by González-Díaz is more feasible as a potential source of DC rather than that of PC:

[till c. 850 SYNTHETIC] *adj-re* → [post 850 ANALYTIC DOUBLE] *more adj-re*

This development, however, although it conveniently places DC as an intermediary between the original and the innovative form, is inconsistent with the rules of morphological hypercharacterisation as described in Dressler – Dziubalska – Spina (2001). This phenomenon is common in the languages of the world, it features in FLA and may be viewed as an instance of regularisation (*feets* for *feet*, etc.). In hypercharacterisation, however, the "double exponency" (Dressler, Dziubalska and Spina 2001: 124) is only apparent, as productivity is limited to the additional marker (i.e. the new one for a given form), which is also a general one for a given category, the original marker being exceptional and unproductive. In this way, the functional load of a given category is shifted from the latter to the former marker (as it could have happened if *-er* had shifted to *more*). It is clear, nevertheless, that hypercharacterisation in DC is and has been of a different kind¹¹ as at any point following the periphrastic innovation, both morphological comparative markers have been productive and none of them may be viewed as exceptional or more marked. Also, diachronically, the more plausible outcome of the proposed derivation would be similar to the development of forms such as *children* and *brethren* in English (cf. Lehmann 2005), following the loss of productivity or the exceptional nature of the original marker. As none of developments typical for hypercharacterisation as described by Dressler, Dziubalska and Spina (2001) is observed in the diachrony of English adjective comparison, González-Díaz's proposal has to be rejected as invalid also for the origins of DC.

2.1. Double comparison as hypercharacterisation

A slightly different approach to hypercharacterisation is followed here in order to

¹¹ It is possible that other vernacular phenomena such as double modals and double negation fall under one type of hypercharacterisation together with double comparatives.

shed some light on the obscure facts of the introduction of DC into English. There is no denying the fact that double comparatives differ from both the synthetic and periphrastic option in that they exemplify morphological hypercharacterisation (cf. Dressler, Dziubalska and Spina 2001: 123; cf. Lehmann 2005 for further examples¹²) – in DC one morphological marker is reinforced by a second marker. Lehmann proposes that double comparatives may be viewed as being "hypercharacterized by the adverb *more* combining with a morphological comparative form" (2005: 135). In order to account for the "double exponency" of DC, it is accepted here, after Lehmann (2005), that hypercharacterisation is a specific type of pleonasm. Pleonasm is a semantic notion with diverse structural manifestations defined by its redundancy and the semantic similarity of its constituents. If it occurs at the level of grammar, as in DC, it may be viewed as a grammaticalised manifestation of hypercharacterisation (Lehmann 2005: 134). Most importantly, Lehmann distinguishes between *phatic* pleonasm and *concord* pleonasm. In the former, the redundant form is motivated e.g., by rhythm, and it does not involve emphasis. In the latter, safety motivations (avoiding ambiguity) and explicitness are present, the latter possibly with emphatic functions. Although Lehmann clearly understands the PDE *more easier* as phatic ("no emphasis and no safety is discernible" 2005: 138) and superlatives as emphatic, i.e. concord pleonasm, it is not possible to apply this analysis directly to ME instances.

Synchronically, then, DC as a compromising alternative involving both the synthetic and the analytic element entailing identical meaning may be viewed in two ways: as either a type of the former (cf. Markus 1988) or more commonly, of the latter (Kytö and Romaine 2000). In other words, to use a hypothetical example of *more easier*, it is either generated as *easier + more* attached to the left or *more easy + -er*. In Lehmann's approach to pleonasm, *more easier* is hypercharacterised by the adverb *more*, which supports the former derivation (2005: 134). The addition of *more* increases the transparency of the comparative thus serving the explicitness function. Let us observe that this function is characteristic for concord, not phatic pleonasm, which reveals a contradiction in Lehmann's approach to DC. This leads to posing the question: What type of pleonasm are we dealing with in the case of DC in ME? Some suggestions on the matter will be proposed below, following the presentation of the data and relevant methodological issues.

3. Double comparison in MED

As has been shown above, despite the efforts to shed some light on the nature of double comparison in Middle English (González-Díaz 2004, 2006a), not many

¹² Lehmann treats *more easier* on a par with *children* and *brethren* at one point in his discussion (2005).

significant insights have been gained so far. In the case of the recent study by González-Díaz (2006a), the methodological approach is to blame, as its reliance on the electronic searches excluded the possibility of investigating the most comprehensive ME database, i.e. the *MED*. Illuminating as they may be, the conclusions drawn from the *HC* exclusively are only based on the 106 tokens and may not be considered comprehensive granted that a larger corpus exists at a researcher's disposal. To bridge this methodological gap in the study of ME double comparatives, manual searches of *MED* were carried out and yielded a total of 233 tokens (104 types). Due to the adverb development in ME (cf. e.g., Tagliamonte and Iko 2002: 239-42) and its uniformity of coding with adjectives, both -Ø and -*li(c)* adverbs were included in the counts. Despite clear syntactic, semantic and function differences between adjectives (constituting 66% of all the analysed tokens) and adverbs (constituting 34% of all the analysed tokens), it cannot be denied that in the case of DC in ME, the same mechanism operates in both adjective and adverb gradation. The inclusion of adverbs is thus determined by the aims of the structural analysis of DC. Obviously, when it comes to syntactic properties or discourse functions, adjectives and adverbs will essentially be kept apart.

Moreover, the *MED* searches included spelling variants for the comparative adverb *more* provided by the *OED*. Among those, the significant numbers were returned for *mor(e)* and *mar(e)*. Apart from that, the comparative OE adverb, *mo/ma* was taken into consideration, despite the fact that *MED* does not quote any genuinely comparative usages for it. The *OED* also mentions that *mo/ma* was replaced by *more* as the comparative grade of *much*. Wright (1923) and Campbell (1959) clearly distinguish between the OE adjective and adverb comparative forms, respectively *māra* (of *micel*) and *mā* (of *micle*). Mossé, however, provides more ambiguous information, giving three variant comparative forms for *mikel*: *māre*, *māre* and *mā* and claiming that "the periphrastic comparison [is carried out] by means of the adverbs *mā*, *māre* and *māst*" (1959: 66). Although Mossé himself does not quote any examples of comparison with *mā*, the following instance (quoted by both *OED* and *MED*), corroborates his claims that the *r*-full and *r*-less variant overlapped in the comparative function:

- 1) Lauandre..is *mo lengger* lewys þanne ysope [?a1450 *Agnus Castus* (Stockh.) 6 171]

The results of the searches for *mo/ma*, however, run counter to this claim, as among the rare cases in which it is followed by an adjective or adverb (12 for *mo*; 3 for *ma*), only three were non-attributive with straightforward comparative readings as in:

- 2) Bot for na bod þat he me mad Ne moht he nim [read: min; Vsp: mi] vngle *ma glad*. [a1400 *Cursor* (Phys-E) 24120]

The majority of instances of *mo/ma* in positions characteristic for adjective or adverb comparison render ambiguous readings:

- 3) Ye han *mo slakker* dettours than am I. [(c1390) Chaucer *CT.Sh.*(Manly-Rickert) B.1603]

In the above example, the *mo* reads either as "a greater amount of" (the original meaning in the *OED*), i.e. there were *more of lazy debtors*, or as an adverb in double comparison, i.e. the *debtors were more lazy*. Given the above-mentioned ambiguities, the examples with *mo/ma* (3 tokens) were included on the assumption of the latter interpretation. Finally, following recent discussion in González-Díaz (2006b) of the OE adverbial intensifiers (cf. also the OE attestations quoted above), the occurrences of *bet* and *swiþor* were also investigated in the *MED* in order to confirm the dominant function of *mor(e)* as the comparative marker. The results show that none of the two intensifiers is attested with the comparative grade in Middle English.

3.1. Results of the analysis

The preliminary description of DC in the *MED* focuses on three aspects. First of all, the most frequent types are presented to allow some structural insights; secondly, the distribution across sub-periods is scrutinised to corroborate the chronology of appearance and disappearance of the construction from English; and, finally, some text-type features are discussed to establish a connection of the form to other text-internal and external characteristics.

3.1.1. Structural features

The type to token ratio (c. 48) shows that each of the types occurs approximately twice¹³. The 10 most frequent types (*better* excluded; cf. below) account for c. 32% of all tokens. It might be interesting to notice that only monosyllabic stems are found in this group (on *better* cf. below). There only are 11 polysyllabic items in the table (italicised), but a further 46 are found among the single occurrences which are left out. This amounts to c. 53% of all types vs. 47% of monosyllables. Not infrequently, the *-er* inflection results in final consonant

¹³ This ratio is comparable to the ratio established by Leech and Culpeper (1997) for periphrastic comparison in PDE.

doubling. Stems with short vowels prevail in the comparative form, which is the result of the ME shortening before clusters of consonants. Some spelling variants without geminates (*greter*, *liker*) might indicate the preservation of the vowel length of the stem. Among the 10 most frequent types (*better* excluded), *strong*, *thick*, *hard* and *light* are stems with a short vowel. Regarding the general distribution, the most frequent types are in general high frequency¹⁴ items referring to the basic, mostly physical features. *Better*, the highest frequency item, however, stands out in this respect, as its semantic scope is very wide. One further distinctive feature of this form is its derivation. As a suppletive comparative with very high overall frequency, it might have easily undergone the loss of morphosyntactic transparency (cf. Schlüter 2001 on *worser*), hence the strengthening by means of *more*. Thus, DC with *better* might not really require as much insight into potential discourse functions as do the other forms with simple derivation.

Table 1: Types of DC in the *MED* (except for single occurrences)

Word	Tokens	Word	Tokens
BETTER	18	VOWLER	3
GRETTER	15	BLYTHER	2
STRENGER	15	BOLDER	2
DEPPER	6	BYTTRE	2
HARDER	6	CLENNER	2
LYKER	6	CRUELLAR	2
THICKER	6	DRIERE	2
HOTTER	5	ELDERE	2
LARGER	5	FELLER	2
LIGHTER	5	FRESHERE	2
PLENER	5	HOLYER	2
WORTHIER	4	LATRE	2
FAIRER	4	LENGGER	2
WORSE	4	NOBLER	2
BRIGHTER	3	RYPELYER	2
		SCHAPLOKER	2

¹⁴ *Better*, *strong*, and *hard* (spelling variants included) score c. 3,000 hits in the *MED*, while *great* c. 10,000. For comparison, *more* (no spelling variants) scores close to 15,000 instances.

FERSERE	3	STREITER	2
GLADDERE	3	SULOKER	2
HEIGHER	3	ZUYFTER	2
MYXTIER	3	WROTHER	2
PROFITABLER	3	WYLDAR	2
SWETTER	3	Other	65

For the *grēt* and *strong* items with the second most frequent number of tokens, it might be interesting to note that the synthetic comparative clearly prevails in the *MED*, while the simple analytic form shows only 11 instances (the number lower than DC) against several hundred for the synthetic for *grēt*; while for *strong*, the synthetic comparison is c. 3 times as frequent as the analytic. For *dēp*, the preference for the synthetic form is even more obvious, as the *MED* only records a single variant of simple analytic comparison. *Hard*, on the other hand, combines regularly with *more* with the average synthetic/analytic ratio at 2:1. *Lik* and *thick* are relatively infrequently graded, the former is attested with 21 analytic and only 5 synthetic comparatives, the latter with 18 and 24 respectively. The patterns of comparison for the types with 6 and more attestations show a clear synthetic preference in the case of *grēt*, *strong*, *hard* and, most clearly, *dēp*. The first and the last of the types under consideration are particularly interesting, as for these DC has more attestations in the *MED* than the analytic comparison. In the case of *thick*, the synthetic preference is only slight, while *lik* is the only type amongst the most frequent showing a clear analytic preference and, in general, a relatively low number of comparative forms.

3.1.2. Distribution in time

As far as the distribution in time is concerned (Figure 1), one instance occurs in the 13th century, while all the occurrences in the first half of the 14th century come from a single source (*Ayenbite of Inwyt*, c. 1340). As has been shown in the previous research, DC indeed peaks between 1350-1450¹⁵ (32% for the late 14th and 34% for the early 15th century), while later, for the next fifty years, it becomes slightly less frequent (c. 25% of all tokens). On closer inspection, however, 60% of tokens found in this period are traced back to only three individual sources (cf. Table 3), rendering DC more an idiosyncrasy than an evenly distributed feature. Thus the decreasing occurrence of DC in this sub-period

¹⁵ The *MED* dating used here is that of composition which means that in some cases allowances have to be taken for later scribal interference.

becomes even more probable. The *MED* obviously does not cover data after 1500 so it is impossible to check on its basis alone whether the trend continues into EModE. If, nonetheless, the *MED* results are plotted into two sub-periods of 150 years each and combined with the findings in González-Díaz (2006a, cf. Figure 2) for EModE, the outcome confirms the diminishing frequency of the construction observed for the last fifty years covered by the *MED*. Following its peak in Late ME, DC shows a decrease of c.75% in the 16th and 17th century.

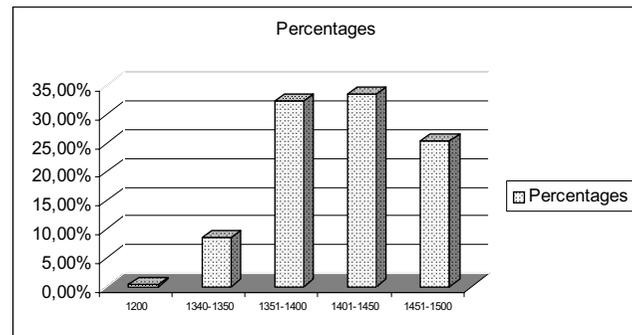


Figure 1. DC across periods – percentages (the *MED*)

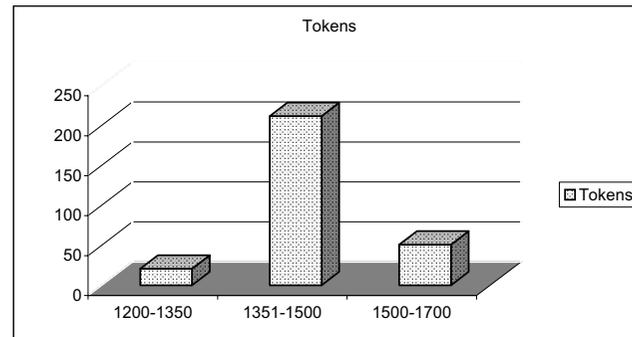


Figure 2. DC across periods tokens (the *MED* and González-Díaz 2006a)

3.1.3. Text-type distribution

The text-type distribution¹⁶ established on the basis of the *MED* is quite consistent (Table 2). Medical scientific writings and religious treatises contain the greatest amount of DC's (c. 45% of all tokens are found in those two text-types). A somewhat lower amount of instances come from poetry, but here the number of sources is higher than for the two most frequent text-types, so the average distribution is significantly lower and comparable to that in the sermon and history categories.

Table 2. Text-type distribution of DC in *MED*

	Tokens	Sources	Items per source
Science (medicine)	69	13	5,3
Religious treatises	55	12	4,6
Poetry	47	26	1,8
Sermon	12	7	1,7
History	9	6	1,5
Other	41	23	–
Totals	233	87	–

3.1.3.1. DC in specialised texts

In the three most frequent text-types, several individual works stand out because of the high incidence of DC (Table 3). The tokens found in those sources account for c. 44% of the total, while the share of the texts in the overall number of sources is c. 8%.

Table 3. Sources with the highest incidence of DC

Source	Tokens	Text-type category
<i>Secreta secretorum</i>	1422	Science (medicine)
	1425	
	1450	
	1475	
<i>Ayenbite of Inwyt</i>	1340	Religious treatise
Thomas Malory, <i>Works</i>	1470	Poetry

¹⁶ The classification followed by the *HC* was followed here. Poetry may stand out as the least topical of the categories, and it indeed is an umbrella term comprising alliterative and metrical texts of a religious and fictional character.

<i>Surgical treatises</i> (Wellcome Lib)	1392	16	Science (medicine)
<i>Tree and twelve fruits of the Holy Ghost</i>	1460	9	Religious treatise
Trevisa's <i>On the properties of things</i>	1398	8	Science (medicine)
<i>Piers Plowman, B Version</i>	1400	7	Poetry

Two reservations pertaining to the nature of the data need to be made at this point. First of all, the fact that DC clusters in individual sources may point to authorial or scribal idiosyncrasy (cf. Mustanoja 1960 and Janecka 2007 on Dan Michel's idiolect¹⁷). Secondly, it should be borne in mind that the text-type distribution established for DC may to a large extent reflect the distribution of sources used for the compilation of the *MED*. Therefore, a more detailed investigation is required in order to verify the statement that the analysed form is indeed a feature of medical scientific text-types. The existence of a specialised corpus, i.e. the *Middle English Medical Texts* (*MEMT*) allows to verify the high incidence of DC established on the basis of the *MED*. Also, the detailed classification of medical texts proposed by the *MEMT* may be instructive here.

Scientific writings in the *MEMT* are divided into three groups based on based on tradition and readership. The first category, "surgical texts" are most learned in the sense that they belong to the highly theoretical sophisticated discourse of the academy. Frequently, this group of texts contains detailed description of anatomy. "Specialised texts", the second category, also originate in the academic tradition. These, in contrast to the first group, deal with a specific topic, such as a specific illness or specialised area. The third group, "Remedies and *materia medica*" contain recipe collections or herbals (Taavitsainen, Pahta and Mäkinen 2004). Following this classification for the *MED* medical scientific writings, the following results are obtained (Table 4):

Table 4. *MEMT* classification of *MED* data

	Surgical texts	Specialised texts	Remedies
% of tokens	61%	32%	7%
Sources	7	2	4
Items per source	6	11	1,25

¹⁷ Janecka points to a specific preference for periphrastic comparison in the *Ayenbite* text (2007: 269).

In order to verify the representativeness of the *MED* data with respect to the text-type distribution, searches for DC were carried out in the specialised corpus: yielding the following results (Table 5):

Table 5. DC in *MEMT* – text-type distribution

	Surgical texts	Specialised texts	Remedies
% of tokens	68%	6%	26%
Sources	3	2	1
Items per source	7,3	1	9

Despite the low number of DC tokens in the *MEMT* (33), the text-type distribution follows the pattern emerging from the *MED* data with respect to the surgical texts. Both sets of data show that among the scientific medical texts, surgical ones show the highest incidence of DC (61% for the *MED* and 68% for the *MEMT*) with a comparable item per source ratio (6 in the *MED* and 7,3 in the *MEMT*). The striking discrepancy between the two sets of data regarding the remaining two categories point to the random nature of the established patterns.

3.2. DCs in ME as phatic pleonasm¹⁸

The *more easy* + *-er* derivation is assumed to be rhythm induced since the presence of an unstressed syllable buffer may be required to avoid a clash of two strongly stressed syllables (cf. Schlüter 2001, 2005). No emphatic function, safety or explicitness effects are involved here¹⁹, rather the redundant form arises as a result of system-internal pressures. Obviously, rhythm-induced patterns are more likely to occur in poetic genres rather than prose, but the occurrences in poetry only account for c.20% of the total number of DC's. In order to verify the claim that DC may be viewed as phatic pleonasm, the rhythmic patterns of the comparatives need to be investigated. Taking into consideration the advancement of final schwa loss in ME (Minkova 1991), the presence of *more* in itself creates a clash of strong syllables, given the initial stress placement in the majority of ME adjectives:

¹⁸ This derivation could be also viewed as an instance of affix pleonasm (Haspelmath 1993: 303), compliant with conservatism in language change: innovations should be added at the end to preserve the syntagmatic structure of the older forms.

¹⁹ Based on an analysis of cases of gradual increase in PDE (e.g., *nearer* and *more near*), Mondorf claims that the weaker degree of intensity is expressed by *-er*, the stronger by *more* (forthcoming: 12).

1) *MOR(e) STRENGere* [(a1398) * Trev. Barth.(Add 27944)]

Still, for the unstressed ending to be added to the adjective as a result of such pressures, the DC has to be followed by an initially stressed content word as in:

2) *MOR(e) GRATTer ZENNe* [(1340) *Ayenb.*(Arun 57)]

Thus, only the attributive positions of double adjectival comparatives may be used to support this view as DC's in predicative functions are usually followed by unstressed function words or pauses (cf. Schlüter 2001: 205). Adverbial double comparatives could also be checked for their rhythmic function, provided that (1) they were monosyllabic prior to the addition of *-er*; (2) they are followed by an initially stressed content word within one tone unit, as in:

3) *MOR(e) BETer WILNed* [(a1375) WPal.(KC 13)]

The *MED* data shows that only 26% (40 tokens) of all doubly marked adjectives are used attributively. In this figure, 75% (30 tokens) of adjectives are monosyllabic prior to the addition of the comparative suffix and they are followed by an initially stressed noun. To this number, 6 occurrences of adverbial doubly comparative forms may be added, giving the total of 36 potentially rhythm-induced DC's amounting to c. 15% of all tokens. To conclude, the low distribution of DC in poetry and the low incidence of potentially rhythm-induced instances in general lends limited support to the analysis of DC in ME as phatic pleonasm, as clearly for the majority of tokens (c. 85%) no evidence is found as to their rhythm-induced nature.

3.3. DC as concord pleonasm

The *easier + more* derivation is motivated by safety (cf. DC in the English vernaculars which used to be historically isolated like Appalachian) and explicitness (as in PC in general). In other words, the *easier* form may involve insufficient morphosyntactic transparency (Haspelmath 1993), which is improved by the addition of the adverb. More form may also be determined by more meaning (Mondorf 2003 and forthcoming; cf. Givón's *Quantity Principle* of Dressler's *Rich get richer*) in the sense of emphasis or other discourse functions. If more meaning is understood as abstract or subjective meanings (cf. Donner 1991), then a semantic analysis of DCs should verify the assumption, i.e. if the encoded meanings are abstract, the addition of *more* may be viewed as an instance

of *more-support*²⁰ as advocated by Mondorf (2003) for abstract meanings in PC. This phenomenon is motivated by ease of processing and is in line with the syntactic preference of PC for predicative and not attributive positions. Therefore, another diagnostic for this hypothesis would be the ratio of attributive vs. predicative uses of DC in ME data. The *MED* results in this respect clearly support the safety motivations advocated by Mondorf, as 74% (114 tokens) of all doubly marked adjectives are non-attributive. This figure accounts for c. 49% of all DC's, as this syntactic criterion may not be extended to cover adverbs. Coming back to the semantic criterion, the analysis was feasible for both categories of DC and yielded the following results:

Table 6. Semantic features of DC's

	ALL TOKENS		ADJECTIVES		ADVERBS	
TOTALS	233		154		79	
SEMANTICS	AB	CON	AB	CON	AB	CON
TOKENS	160	73	100	54	60	19
PERCENTAGES	69%	31%	65%	35%	76%	24%

Clearly, the abstract meanings prevail in both adjectival and adverbial forms, though the tendency is stronger in the latter, with a 3:1 ratio of abstract vs. concrete meanings against 2:1 in the case of the adjectives. Still, the *more-support* hypothesis is clearly confirmed for 69% of all tokens rendering the concord pleonasm interpretation feasible. One other issue to be taken into consideration at this point is that the *more-support* hypothesis pertains to periphrastic comparison in general and its verification for DC corroborates the similarity of patterns of the two gradation strategies but, unfortunately, does not allow drawing conclusions as to the uniqueness of the double periphrastic strategy. Therefore, further exploration is needed in this respect.

3.4. Redundancy and semantic similarity – an opposition?

The two defining aspects of pleonasm may remain in opposition in the case of DC (cf. Section 2.1). If one assumes that *more easier* does not radically differ in meaning from *more easy* (or *easier*), then the involved redundancy is non-functional (with system-internal motivations, and no discourse functions). The non-functional redundancy approach is in line with the analysis of DCs in ME

²⁰ *More-support*: "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 rather than the synthetic comparative" (Mondorf 2003: 252).

as phatic pleonasm, but the clearly repetitive nature of semantically similar elements and the results of the analysis carried out above (cf. Section 3.2) yield this interpretation highly improbable. Looking at the elements responsible for the semantic similarity of constituents, it becomes obvious that *more* and *-er* involved, for the rhotic ME speech, repetition²¹ (reiteration) of a segment, i.e. /r/ (cf. Wang 2005: 510), especially, moreover, in a well-exposed word-final position²². As any instance of repetition, this one may result from safety motivations and may perform a range of discourse functions (cohesive, poetic, sound symbolism). It may also involve emphasis or reinforcement. Given that among the most frequent types (4 and more occurrences), 6 include the additional /r/ in the stem (*GRETTTER*, *STRENGER*, *HARDER*, *LARGER*, *WORTHIER*, *FAIRER*) while the total of similar types amounts to c. 36% (39% of tokens), the significance of /r/ repetition is strengthened. Those results are not, however, statistically significant and /r/ is an extremely common segment for any rhotic variety of English; further evidence is therefore needed to verify the repetition hypothesis for DC.

Another look at Table 1 above and further insight into the structural features of comparative stems may prove instructive here. One of the factors to be taken into account at this point may be the presence of a stem-final consonantal cluster and its characteristics. Naturally, clusters resulting from gradation-related gemination, derivation through *-li(c)* or schwa deletion (syllabic /r/ or /l/) need to be excluded from investigation. DCs containing stem-final clusters of a different type are presented below (Table 7):

Table 7. DCs with stem-final clusters

Types	Tokens
STRENGER	15
HARDER	6
LARGER	5
LIGHTER	5
WORTHIER	4
BRIGHTER	3
FERSERE	3

²¹ Cf. the reduplication interpretation of DC provided by González-Díaz (2006a). Note, however, that such an interpretation involves consequences for the typological classification of English (cf. e.g., Haspelmath et al. 2005) which would not be easy to defend.

²² Cf. DC in Palmerston English *moa stronga* both <a> are schwas (Romaine 2005: 493).

MY3TIER	3
BOLDER	2
LENGGER	2
WYLDAR	2
DERKERE	1
EXPERTERE	1
MILDER	1
PLESYNGUR	1
SCHARPER	1
SCHORTYR	1
SHYNYNGER	1
SMERTRE	1
19 (18%)	58 (25%)

Despite the rather weak statistical representation (18% of types and 25% of tokens), the pattern emerging from the above data is clear. All the clusters in question contain a velar segment (/ŋ/, /ç/ or a retracted realisation of /r/ or /l/) as their first element and for half of the clusters in types this element is /r/. These observations may lead to revising the repetition hypothesis: not only may the presence of an additional /r/ in the stem be conducive to the appearance of DC, but also a preference emerges for the stems with final clusters containing a velar segment. The latter factor is only seemingly not connected to the former, but taking into consideration the word-final position of /r/ repetition in DC, the presence of a cluster adds weight to the final syllable of the comparative form in two ways: (1) through the addition of an onset to the syllable containing the inflectional ending²³; and (2) through the presence of a velar (50% of /r/) coda in the final syllable of the stem (in harmony with the /r/ of *-er*). For instance in *larger*, *brighter* and *lengger*:

- 1) MORe LA R^[2] g^[1] er
- 2) MORe BRI GH^[2] t^[1] er
- 3) MORe LE NG^[2] g^[1] er

As the above considerations have shown, /r/ repetition is crucial in DC, manifested also in feature harmony (backness). This extended /r/ effect, as one may put it, observed in the analysed *MED* data, is highly functional as it enhances the

²³ Obviously, the gemination characteristic for the process of adjective and adverb comparison also results in a cluster, but it is not possible to uncritically pose long realisations for ME consonants.

transparency and adds emphasis to the comparatives, providing another argument for viewing DC as an instance of concord rather than phatic pleonasm. Obviously, detailed analysis of DC in context is required in order to illuminate its discourse functions. Given, however, that the text-type distribution discussed above revealed a high incidence of DC in surgical texts, not infrequently containing sophisticated descriptions of anatomical detail, the safety and explicitness motivations characteristic for concord pleonasm are most probable.

4. Some conclusions

The above analysis covered several different aspects of DCs in ME, yielding the following results. Firstly, with respect to the diachronic distribution of the form, the *MED* data indicate its peak for the century between 1350-1450. It is highly unlikely that the form was common before this period. Following it, a gradual statistical decrease is observed, but the amount of sources in which DC is attested renders the decrease much more abrupt. Secondly, the text-type distribution has shown the highest incidence of the form in medical scientific writings, and more specifically, surgical texts. Thirdly, some externally-oriented explanations of DC (hypercharacterisation, pleonasm) were instructive in arriving at some conclusions as to the functionality of the form as an option in adjective gradation. It has been shown that the *MED* data for DC corroborate safety and explicitness motivations behind users' choices, as in Lehmanns (2005) concord pleonasm.

To use the notion from Haspelmath (1999), one may claim that the diachronic development of DC in English is a case of a failure in the adaptation of grammar to speakers' needs. This view may be supported by the ubiquity of the construction in the PDE vernaculars and by its frequency in Late ME demonstrating that DC may easily become entrenched in the users' minds. As a result of either functional motivations or paradigmatic pressures, both diachronically and in PDE, DC has been and is prevented from becoming an obligatory part of standard grammar as a consequence of the particularly strong influence of economy as a "hard" constraint, the preference for uniform coding and the arguments against pleonasm and tautology. Further research into specific discourse functions of DC in the period of its prime occurrence are essential in order to give a detailed overview of its functional scope, in particular as related to the feature harmony and the extended /r/ effect discussed above.

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