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Tine Breban

ENGLISH ADJECTIVES OF COMPARISON

LEXICAL AND GRAMMATICALIZED USES

TOPICS IN
ENGLISH LINGUISTICS

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English Adjectives of Comparison

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by

Tine Breban



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ISBN 978-3-11-020580-0
e-ISBN 978-3-11-021601-1
ISSN 1434-3452

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Breban, Tine, 1980–
English adjectives of comparison : lexical and grammaticalized
uses / by Tine Breban.
p. cm. – (Topics in English linguistics; 63)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-3-11-020580-0 (alk. paper)
1. English language – Adjective. 2. English language – Gram-
mar. 3. Grammar, Comparative and general. I. Title.
PE1241.B74 2010
425–dc22

2010002364

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

© 2010 Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 10785 Berlin/New York

Cover image: Brian Stablyk/Photographer's Choice RF/Getty Images

Typesetting: RoyalStandard, Hong Kong

Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen

∞ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

English Adjectives of Comparison

Topics in English Linguistics

63

Editors

Elizabeth Closs Traugott
Bernd Kortmann

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Acknowledgements

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Kristin Davidse, who acted as supervisor of my doctoral research. She has always generously shared her time, insights and her friendship. During the revision stages, this book has greatly benefited from the careful reading and expert comments of David Denison and Elizabeth Traugott. Many of the ideas in this book have been inspired and shaped by the comments and suggestions of editors, anonymous referees and conference participants who have read/heard earlier papers on adjectives of comparison, in particular Sylvia Adamson, Costas Canakis, Bert Cornillie, Walter De Mulder, Roberta Facchinetti, Teresa Fanego, Olga Fischer, Elke Gehweiler, Victorina Gonzalez-Diaz, Göran Kjølmer, Ekkehard König, Peter Lauwers, Peter Matthews, Carita Paradis, John Payne, Lotte Sommerer and Freek Van de Velde. I thank all my colleagues of the Functional Linguistics Leuven research unit, An Laffut, An Van linden, Christopher Shank, Ditte Kimps, Ellen Aspeslagh, Hendrik De Smet, Hubert Cuyckens, Isolde Vande Walle, Jean-Christophe Verstraete, Kristin Davidse, Liesbet Heyvaert, Lieselotte Brems, Lieven Vandelanotte, Lobke Ghesquière, Nele Olivier, Peter Petré, Peter Willemse, Sigi Vandewinkel and Tinne Van Rompaey. It is an honour and a pleasure being part of the team! I am especially grateful to Hendrik and Lieven for all their practical help in technical matters of many kinds. A special word of thanks is due to Hubert Cuyckens, whose master course on grammaticalization provided the spark that resulted in this book. Finally, I am grateful to Birgit Sievert and Wolfgang Konwitschny from Mouton de Gruyter for their practical assistance.

My sincere thanks go to the Research Foundation-Flanders and the Research Council of K.U.Leuven, which provided the necessary financial and logistic support to execute my research and to write this book. My doctoral research was carried out as part of the projects FWO G.0218.01, OT/04/12 and OT/00/05. The postdoctoral research scholarships granted by the Research Council of K.U.Leuven (January to September 2007) and the Research Foundation-Flanders (October 2007 to September 2010) offered me the luxury of time to revise and complete this book.

Finally, I could not have written this book without the unfailing and boundless support and love of my family, my parents Guy and Annemarie, my brother Bertjan, my aunt Gudula, and my Kessel-Lo family Leen and Tom.

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Introduction

This study is concerned with English adjectives of general comparison, i.e. adjectives such as *same*, *other*, *different*, *identical*, *similar*, *comparable*, etc. which express “comparison in terms of likeness and unlikeness without respect to any particular property” (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 76–77). This type of comparison is fundamentally different from that expressed by the comparative forms of ordinary adjectives, which compare entities with regard to a specific quality and hence express “particular comparison” (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 77). General comparison encompasses three semantic subfields of likeness: full likeness or identity, partial likeness or similarity, and unlikeness or difference. The main claim of this study is that the synchronic functional versatility of these adjectives can only be adequately described as the result of diachronic processes of grammaticalization and subjectification affecting their prenominal uses in the noun phrase (henceforth NP). This claim will prove to be interesting not only from a *descriptive* perspective, but also presents an opportunity to investigate two important *theoretical* issues that have been rather neglected in the literature so far: (1) the modelling of the roles and uses of adjectives occurring prenominally in the NP, and (2) grammaticalization and subjectification processes taking place in the NP. The study is based on the analysis of extensive sets of actual Present-day and historical English language data.

Descriptive problem: English Adjectives of Comparison

The adjectives of comparison display a wide variety of functions in current English; compare by way of illustration the following text examples with *different* and *other* (1–5).

- (1) If Gray’s anecdotal accounts can be believed, his books, videos, seminars, audiotapes, calendars, interactive CD-Roms, counselling sessions, lectures, and five-day Mediterranean relationship cruises, all trumpeting the simple notion that men and women are **different**, have changed lives. (CB)¹

1. The examples marked ‘CB’ are extracted from the COBUILD corpus, which is a 56 million word selection of the Bank of English that can be accessed via the Collins WordbanksOnline service, and are reproduced here with the kind permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

- (2) Again, the weather report in Haifa is not my expertise at this exact moment, but Haifa's a **very different city** from Tel Aviv which is very flat and open and the dissipation of chemical agents will be much swifter. (CB)
- (3) He said the witness had been secretly recorded confessing to the murder to an undercover policeman, had a cache of knives in his bedroom and had been convicted of a **different stabbing** in a Gold Coast restaurant. (CB)
- (4) I won the award for best junior bird in the show. I was so happy: the first show I entered, and I won a trophy! Since then I have shown many other birds and taken prizes at **different shows**. (CB)
- (5) Cancer of the breast and cancer of the bowel are much more common in Western nations than in **other countries**. (CB)

In (1), *different* functions as predicate in a copular clause and expresses that men and women are in many respects unlike each other. In (2), *different* occurs prenominally in the NP *a very different city*. Its meaning is again to signal unlikeness: Haifa is not at all like Tel Aviv because it is not as flat and open. *Different* in examples such as (2) functions as attribute (see Halliday 1994: 184): it ascribes (a degree of) likeness to two entities being compared. In (3) *different* is also found in prenominal position in the NP, but it has a very different function. It indicates that the suspect of the current crime was involved in a previous stabbing as well. As such, it helps to identify the specific instance of stabbing referred to. In other words, it functions as a secondary deictic or postdeterminer (Halliday 1994: 183). In (4) *different* indicates that the speaker has won prizes at several shows and thus functions as quantifier (Halliday 1994: 183–184). Finally, in (5) *other* conveys yet a different meaning; it indicates that the countries referred to belong to the category of non-Western countries. It identifies a subtype of the general type countries, that is, it functions as classifier (Halliday 1994: 184–185).

The only existing study of the functional diversity of *different*, *other* and the other adjectives of general comparison known to me is that of Halliday and Hasan (1976: 77–80). However, as we will see in Chapter 3, their analysis includes only two prenominal uses of adjectives of comparison, the attribute and the postdeterminer use illustrated above in examples (2) *a very different city* and (3) *a different stabbing*. Moreover, their central claim that the postdeterminer use always involves identity or non-identity with a separately coded entity (i.e. external construal), while the attribute

use is always construed as mutual likeness without a distinctly appearing second entity (i.e. NP-internal construal) does not hold when it is confronted with real language data.

The aim of this study is to systematically and exhaustively map out and discuss all the uses of the English adjectives of comparison. I will propose that the different uses of adjectives of comparison in current English can be accounted for as reflexes of different stages of grammaticalization processes affecting the adjectives in the prenominal zone of the NP. Put simply, this grammaticalization claim can be formulated as follows. Originally, the adjectives expressed descriptive likeness as predicative adjectives, e.g. (1) *men and women are different*, or as attributes in the NP, e.g. (2) *a very different city*. These latter uses served then as input for processes of grammaticalization and subjectification leading to the development of new uses that fulfil (secondary) determiner functions in the NP, i.e. the postdeterminer use which adds info regarding the identifiability status of the referent, as in (3) *a different stabbing*, and the quantifier use illustrated in (4) *different shows*. In a later development, the postdeterminer use which furthers the identification of instances was extended to the identification of subtypes; that is to say, to a classifier use as in (5) *other countries*. This central claim will be developed in Chapters 4 and 5.

In Chapter 4, I will develop the hypothesis that the current uses of adjectives of comparison are the result of grammaticalization. I will characterize the hypothesized grammaticalization process as involving a shift from descriptive to textual meanings in Traugott's (1982, 1989) terms. I will then substantiate the grammaticalization claim by showing that the grammatical postdeterminer, classifier, and quantifier uses display several formal and semantic reflexes associated with grammaticalization (cf. Lehmann 1985, 1995 [1982]; Hopper 1991; Hopper and Traugott 2003 [1993]; Bybee 2003). I will further argue that the driving force behind the process is the conventionalization of inferences (Heine et al. 1991; Traugott and König 1991; Hopper and Traugott 2003 [1993]).

In Chapter 5, I will argue that the hypothesized grammaticalization process involved subjectification as a semantic subprocess. The grammatical uses will be argued to result from several types of subjectification that have been distinguished in the literature. Firstly, the grammatical meanings are more subjective in the sense that they are mechanisms with which the speaker takes control of the discourse in order to facilitate the interpretation by the hearer. This is textual subjectivity as defined by Traugott (1995). Moreover, as I will argue, the complementary notion of intersubjectivity (e.g. Traugott and Dasher 2002) also applies, as these mechanisms

strongly attend to the communicative needs of the hearer. Secondly, the grammatical uses display subjectivity in Langacker's (1990, 1998) construal-related sense.

So far, I have set out the main descriptive claim of this study, which is developed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of Part I. The purpose of Part II is to put flesh on the hypothesis that the current uses of the adjectives of comparison are the reflexes of grammaticalization-cum-subjectification by investigating it in detail for six core adjectives of comparison on the basis of extensive and close study of synchronic corpus data. *Other*, *different*, *same*, *identical*, *similar*, and *comparable* were selected to represent the three subfields of comparison, difference, identity and similarity. For each adjective, I will analyze a data set of 400 examples randomly extracted from the COBUILD corpus. This will allow me to provide an in-depth description of all the different current uses of adjectives of comparison as constituting the synchronic layers (Hopper 1991) resulting from processes of grammaticalization. I will systematically investigate bridging contexts, i.e. examples of fully contextualized discourse that allow and support more than one reading (Evans and Wilkins 2000), conceptual links between layers, and relative frequencies of distinct uses in the corpus data. My aim is to draw up descriptive profiles for the three fields of comparison and trace the possible concrete paths of grammaticalization and subjectification covered by the adjectives in each field. Chapter 6 will focus on *other* and *different* which represent the field of difference, Chapter 7 on *same* and *identical* representing identity, and Chapter 8 will be dedicated to the adjectives of similarity *similar* and *comparable*.

Part III of this study comprises two additional case studies which adduce diachronic evidence for both the general grammaticalization-cum-subjectification claim proposed in Part I and the more specific claims regarding paths and models put forward in Part II. In Chapter 10, I will present a diachronic corpus study consisting of historical samples extracted from the Helsinki corpus (750–1710) and the Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (1710–1920) which is complementary to the synchronic corpus analysis of the six core adjectives of comparison, *other*, *different*, *same*, *identical*, *similar*, and *comparable*, in Part II. In Chapter 11, I will report on a corpus study zooming in on and refining the analysis of the field of difference. I will compare historical data ranging from 1250 to 1920 for six adjectives of difference, *different*, *distinct*, *divers(e)*, *several*, *sundry*, and *various*, which all have developed along a suggested grammaticalization path ultimately leading to the quantifier use exhibited by *several* in current English.

Theoretical issues

As I indicated at the beginning of this introduction, the descriptive claim that adjectives of comparison underwent grammaticalization also provides an opportunity to address theoretical gaps in the existing approaches to the semantic and grammatical structure of the English NP as well as in the grammaticalization literature. The two main issues will be identified in the first two chapters of this study.

Problem 1: The NP as locus for grammaticalization and subjectification

The first issue to be concerned with is the fact that the existing theoretical models of the NP have not been designed to deal with processes of change taking place in the NP. In Chapter 1 I will present a model for the English NP that can accommodate the proposed grammaticalization and subjectification of adjectives of comparison. This model argues against a class-based approach to the different elements constituting the NP in favour of a function-based one (e.g. Halliday 1994 [1985]; Bache 2000; and Langacker 1991). It combines this functional analysis of the different elements with an analysis that recognizes the different combinatorics between them.

The construction of this model reveals three specific theoretical deficiencies in the existing literature. Firstly, little attention has been devoted to adjectives in the NP. In the class-based approach, they are treated as one monolithic block of (pre)modifiers of the head noun. However, as was argued in several influential papers in the 1960's such as Bolinger (1967), Crystal (1967), and Teyssier (1968), and later in the works of Halliday and Hasan (1976), Halliday (1994 [1985]), and Bache (2000), the prenominal zone encompasses several different functions that are typically but not necessarily realized by adjectives. In the literature just mentioned three functions are associated with adjectives, postdeterminer, attribute, and classifier. I will further build on this three-way analysis and propose that it has to be combined with a dynamic perspective: adjectives can express more than one function at the same time and can change from prototypical expression of one function to prototypical expression of another. It is only in a dynamic functional model that processes of change such as grammaticalization and subjectification can be conceived of.

A second theoretical gap which characterizes most of the existing approaches to the NP is their deficient treatment of the combinatory relations between the different (functional) elements in the NP. The interac-