

The superlative alternation in British vs. American English: Questionnaire-based insights

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While the alternation of synthetic and analytic comparative forms ranks among the most extensively researched alternation phenomena in English, the superlative has to date received relatively sparse scholarly attention. In this talk, I will address this research gap, focussing on varietal differences in the light of evidence gleaned from a questionnaire-based elicitation study.

The corpus evidence presented by Mondorf (2009) for comparatives suggests a division of labour along the lines of Rohdenburg's (1996) complexity principle for a wide range of linguistic constraints. The tendency to resort to the analytic variant in cases of increased cognitive complexity has most recently been demonstrated to operate in both production and perception (Kunter 2017). Multifactorial corpus studies have found an impact of factors related to the adjectival base, such as the number of syllables, the final segment, and measures of frequency (Hilpert 2008, Cheung & Zhang 2016, Chua 2018). Empirical engagement with the superlative alternation has as yet been limited to selected linguistic variables (Cheung & Zhang 2016), notably excluding potential differences between varieties.

The results that will be presented come from a questionnaire study involving 723 participants from multiple varietal backgrounds, most prominently the standard reference varieties BrE and AmE. The 120 test sentences were manipulated along seven context-dependent factors and worded in such a way as to trigger the superlative of 23 mono- and disyllabic adjectives for which frequency analyses of BNC and COCA indicate considerable alternation. A sociodemographic part preceded the test items to enable the assessment of sociolinguistic variables. Hierarchical mixed-effects regression modelling (Gelman & Hill 2007) was used to assess the impact of context-dependent and user-related predictors.

The analysis suggests that context-dependent variables indeed play a role in the superlative alternation. Infinitival complementation and end weight have the strongest impact on the alternation of all linguistic constraints investigated. The results of two variables designed to measure morphosyntactic persistence (Szmrecsanyi 2006) turn out contrary to the expected trend. It is further observed that speakers of the two main reference varieties BrE and AmE do not exhibit systematic differences in their susceptibility to the cognitive mechanisms that may underlie this alternation. From a methodological perspective, I argue that elicitation studies of this kind constitute a valuable complement to the corpus studies conducted on this phenomenon so far in that they allow for the operationalisation of linguistic and extralinguistic variables in a controlled setting.

References

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