Comparatives vs. Superlatives in Albanian and English: Understanding Key Grammar Differences and Similarities

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Abstract

This study conducts a comparative analysis of the formation and usage of comparative and superlative adjectives in Albanian and English, two languages with notably different strategies for expressing degree. While English utilizes both synthetic means—by affixing morphemes for shorter adjectives—and analytic constructions for longer adjectives, Albanian relies solely on analytic methods. A survey administered to 96 intermediate-level students at the University of Tirana provided insights into learners' ability to recognize standard forms, apply transformation rules, and handle irregular adjective patterns. Results indicate that although students exhibit high proficiency in identifying regular constructions in both languages, irregular forms—especially in English—continue to pose challenges. This study not only deepens our understanding of cross-linguistic grammatical processes but also offers practical recommendations for language instruction by emphasizing tailored, interactive pedagogical strategies. Implications for both linguistic theory and second language acquisition are discussed, with directions for future research outlined.

Keywords: comparatives, superlatives, Albanian, English, language acquisition, syntactic structures, morphological processes, cross-linguistic analysis

1. Introduction

Comparative and superlative adjectives are fundamental components of language, enabling speakers to express relative differences and establish hierarchies in quality, size, or other measurable attributes. Their construction varies significantly across languages—a phenomenon that has important implications both for theoretical linguistics and for practical language instruction. This study focuses on comparing the grammatical strategies employed by Albanian and English, two languages that differ considerably in their use of synthetic versus analytic processes.

In English, adjective gradation is achieved through a combination of synthetic methods—where one-syllable adjectives adopt the suffixes –er and –est (e.g., "small, smaller, smallest")—and analytic constructions, which are particularly prevalent for adjectives with two or more syllables (e.g., "beautiful, more beautiful, most beautiful"). This dual strategy not only reflects historical language development but also shapes the cognitive load placed on language learners. In contrast, Albanian, as evidenced by early 20th-century research (Pekmezi, 1908) and later studies (Hysi, 1997; Shkurtaj, 2012), relies exclusively on analytic constructions. Albanian does not employ dedicated form-building morphemes for gradation; instead, it uses lexical means that evolve functionally and later become morphologically entrenched.

The divergence in these systems raises several important questions: How do these differences affect learners' acquisition and usage of comparative and superlative forms? What cognitive challenges arise when navigating irregular forms, particularly in English? And finally, how can instructional strategies be optimized to address these challenges in a bilingual context? This research is designed to answer these questions by comparing learner performance on survey tasks and exploring the implications for language pedagogy.

By examining the similarities and differences between Albanian and English adjective gradation, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of cross-linguistic interference, cognitive processing in bilinguals, and the overall design of effective language instruction. In doing so, it bridges the gap between linguistic theory and practical classroom applications.

2. Literature Review

The study of comparative and superlative adjective formation has long occupied linguists and language educators alike. Early studies, such as Pekmezi's seminal work (1908), provided the foundation for understanding the analytic nature of Albanian adjective gradation. Pekmezi argued that, unlike many European languages that rely on synthetic morphological markers, Albanian employs a fully analytic system, a finding that has since been corroborated and expanded upon by later researchers like Hysi (1997) and Shkurtaj (2012).

In English, the dual approach to adjective gradation has been well documented. Crystal (2008) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002) detail how one-syllable adjectives typically adopt inflectional morphemes to form comparatives and superlatives, while adjectives with more syllables require periphrastic constructions. This variation is not merely a stylistic choice but reflects deeper historical and phonological factors that have influenced English morphology over time.

Recent research has also focused on the pedagogical implications of these grammatical differences. Studies by Kurani and Muho (2014) and Osmani and Pajaziti (2017)

have examined the challenges faced by language learners when confronted with differing morphosyntactic rules. These investigations reveal that learners often experience cross-linguistic interference, where the rules from one language may be incorrectly applied to another. For example, bilingual speakers might overgeneralize the use of synthetic forms in English when their native language, such as Albanian, offers only analytic alternatives.

In addition to morphosyntactic differences, cognitive processes involved in language acquisition have been explored by Hudson (1996) and Trask (1997). Their work suggests that the transparency of analytic constructions may, in some cases, reduce cognitive load and facilitate learning, yet the irregularities inherent in English still pose significant obstacles for learners. The findings of Maani (2016) and Millaku (2019) further reinforce the notion that while regular patterns are more easily acquired, irregular forms continue to challenge even intermediate-level learners.

Moreover, historical perspectives provided by Byron (1976) and Çabej (1972) offer valuable context on how cultural and historical developments shape language evolution. Their work underlines that language contact and socio-cultural influences often drive the divergence in grammatical structures, which in turn affects language instruction and acquisition strategies. Newmark's (1991) reflections on translation also highlight the importance of understanding these structural differences when engaging in cross-linguistic communication and education.

Overall, the literature consistently points to a complex interplay between morphology, syntax, and cognitive processing in the formation and acquisition of comparatives and superlatives. However, explicit comparative studies focusing on Albanian and English remain limited, and there is a clear need for research that not only compares structural differences but also links these findings to effective teaching practices. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a detailed comparative analysis while also considering the practical implications for language education.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design and Materials

This research employs a mixed-methods design centered on a structured survey instrument. The survey was specifically developed to assess learners' recognition of, and ability to apply, the grammatical rules governing comparative and superlative forms in both Albanian and English. The instrument comprises 15 multiple-choice questions, each designed to probe different aspects of adjective gradation—from the application of synthetic rules in English to the analytic constructions used in Albanian.

The survey questions were crafted following an extensive review of existing literature. Items addressing synthetic construction in English drew upon examples provided by Crystal (2008) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002), while questions on the analytic processes in

Albanian were informed by studies from Hysi (1997) and Shkurtaj (2012). The survey also included items on irregular adjective forms, aiming to capture the nuances that typically challenge learners in English.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study sample comprised 96 intermediate-level students enrolled in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana. These students were selected because they had received formal instruction in both Albanian and English, providing an ideal population for investigating cross-linguistic differences in adjective formation. Demographic details—such as age, years of formal education, and self-reported language proficiency—were collected to contextualize the survey data and allow for subsequent analysis of performance variations based on background factors.

3.3 Procedure

The survey was administered over a two-week period using a dual-mode approach: in-person sessions complemented by an online platform. This approach was adopted to ensure maximal participation and to accommodate varying student schedules. Before participation, each student was provided with clear instructions outlining the study's aims, the structure of the survey, and the importance of accuracy in responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was rigorously maintained throughout the research process.

During the survey sessions, researchers provided brief clarifications when necessary without influencing the participants' responses. The combination of in-person and online administration not only increased the reach of the study but also helped to capture a diverse range of responses, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data collected from the survey were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics—such as frequency distributions and percentages—were employed to assess the accuracy of responses across different grammatical categories (e.g., regular vs. irregular forms). For example, the analysis determined the percentage of students who correctly identified the comparative form of adjectives like "big" and "good."

Inferential statistical methods were also applied to explore potential relationships between participants' demographic variables (e.g., age, language proficiency) and their performance on specific survey items. This multivariate approach allowed the study to not only document overall trends in language acquisition but also to identify any systematic

differences that might be linked to individual learner characteristics. The statistical software package SPSS was utilized to ensure a rigorous and reproducible analysis.

In addition to quantitative analyses, qualitative observations were recorded during the survey sessions. These observations provided context for understanding common error patterns and the types of reasoning employed by students when selecting their answers. Such qualitative insights were instrumental in shaping the subsequent discussion of the results and the development of practical pedagogical recommendations.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of Findings

The survey results reveal a high level of proficiency among participants in recognizing and applying standard forms of comparative and superlative adjectives. Notably, 94% of respondents correctly identified "bigger" as the comparative form of "big" in English, with only a marginal 3% selecting an incorrect alternative such as "more big." In the case of superlative forms, 79% accurately recognized "best," despite a small subset (12%) erroneously opting for "better" instead.

4.2 Detailed Analysis of Rule Application

When examining the application of transformation rules, a significant majority of students demonstrated a strong grasp of the underlying principles. For adjectives ending in –y, 63% of respondents correctly transformed "happy" into "happier." In the Albanian context, 77% of students successfully applied the appropriate morphological affixation—illustrated by the transformation into "më i bukur." These results indicate that while learners are generally adept at applying regular rules, some inconsistencies remain, particularly with more complex or irregular forms.

4.3 Handling of Irregular Forms

One of the study's key findings is the marked difficulty that learners experience with irregular adjective forms in English. Approximately 81% of participants correctly identified the irregular comparative and superlative forms of "good," yet the remaining 19% struggled with these exceptions. This discrepancy underscores the persistent challenge that irregular forms present, even among intermediate-level learners. Such challenges are indicative of deeper cognitive processes involved in language acquisition, where exceptions to rules require more robust memorization and practice.

4.4 Supplementary Observations

Additional survey data revealed important trends related to learning preferences and self-reported difficulties:

- **Interactive Learning Preference:** Fifty-seven percent of participants indicated that interactive methods—such as group discussions and multimedia lessons—significantly enhance their understanding of complex grammatical structures.
- **Perceived Challenges:** Irregularity in adjective forms was the most commonly cited obstacle (57%), followed by challenges in processing structural transformations (19%).
- **Comparative Perception:** Although 39% of respondents found the acquisition of comparative and superlative forms equally challenging in both languages, 29% perceived English as slightly easier, whereas 24% favored the relative simplicity of Albanian constructions.

These findings not only validate the survey's quantitative data but also provide rich qualitative context that will be instrumental in framing the subsequent discussion and pedagogical recommendations.

5. Discussion

The present study provides a comprehensive analysis of comparative and superlative adjective formation in Albanian and English. The high accuracy rates in recognizing regular forms suggest that standard pedagogical approaches are effective for teaching the bulk of grammatical rules. However, the persistent difficulties associated with irregular forms—particularly in English—highlight the need for enhanced instructional strategies that specifically target these exceptions.

5.1 Cognitive and Pedagogical Implications

The challenges encountered with irregular forms align with cognitive theories of language acquisition that emphasize the importance of pattern recognition and memory. The higher error rate associated with irregular adjectives likely reflects the greater cognitive load required to memorize exceptions, as opposed to applying regular, rule-based transformations. This finding supports the arguments of Hudson (1996) and Trask (1997), who assert that explicit instruction and repetitive practice are essential for overcoming irregularity-related difficulties.

From a pedagogical perspective, the strong preference for interactive learning methods among participants underscores the potential benefits of incorporating dynamic teaching strategies. Techniques such as group discussions, role-playing, and multimedia presentations could provide the repeated exposure and contextual reinforcement necessary for mastering irregular forms. The data also suggest that a more nuanced approach—one that balances explicit rule instruction with engaging, practice-based activities—may be particularly effective in multilingual classrooms where cross-linguistic interference is a factor.

5.2 Cross-Linguistic Interference

The study's results indicate that bilingual students are not immune to cross-linguistic interference. While learners demonstrated robust recognition of regular forms in both languages, the irregular forms in English presented notable challenges. This interference may stem from the analytic nature of Albanian, which does not require the memorization of irregular morphological changes. As a result, students may inadvertently transfer strategies from their native language to English, leading to errors. Addressing this interference in the classroom will require educators to explicitly contrast the two systems and provide targeted practice to help learners compartmentalize the differing rules.

5.3 Integration with Existing Literature

The findings of this study resonate with prior research in the field. For example, Crystal (2008) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002) have long emphasized the dual nature of English adjective gradation, and the current results confirm that while synthetic forms are generally easier for learners to internalize, irregularities continue to present challenges. Similarly, the insights provided by Hysi (1997) and Shkurtaj (2012) regarding the analytic construction of Albanian adjectives find further support here, reinforcing the idea that language-specific strategies influence overall learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the results contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding bilingual language acquisition. Studies such as those by Kurani and Muho (2014) and Osmani and Pajaziti (2017) have noted that the cognitive processes underlying language transfer can complicate the acquisition of non-native grammatical structures. The present study adds to this literature by quantifying the degree of difficulty associated with irregular forms and by offering concrete suggestions for mitigating these challenges through targeted pedagogical interventions.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The sample size of 96 participants, while sufficient for initial insights, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to include a broader and more diverse cohort of learners, potentially spanning different proficiency levels and age groups. Moreover, the survey format, although effective for quantitative analysis, does not capture the full spectrum of cognitive processes that underlie language acquisition. Incorporating qualitative methods—such as in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and error analysis—would provide a richer understanding of the challenges faced by learners, particularly in relation to irregular forms.

Future investigations could also explore the impact of various teaching interventions on reducing cross-linguistic interference. Longitudinal studies that track student

performance over time would be particularly valuable, as they could reveal whether interactive and multimedia-based methods yield lasting improvements in the acquisition of irregular adjective forms. Additionally, research that examines the role of metalinguistic awareness in bilingual education could further elucidate how learners come to understand and apply disparate grammatical rules across languages.

6. Implications for Educational Practice

The practical implications of this study are significant for educators tasked with teaching language structures in bilingual or multilingual contexts. Given that irregular adjective forms continue to challenge learners, language instructors should consider integrating explicit instruction on exceptions into their curricula. This may involve dedicating specific lessons to the morphological and syntactic peculiarities of irregular forms, as well as incorporating frequent, targeted practice sessions.

Interactive learning methods emerged as a clear preference among students. Educators are encouraged to incorporate group discussions, role-playing scenarios, and multimedia resources into their teaching practices. Such approaches not only engage students more effectively but also provide the contextual and repetitive exposure needed to internalize complex grammatical patterns. Moreover, teachers should consider using contrastive analysis to highlight the differences between the analytic strategies of Albanian and the mixed strategies of English. This approach can help learners develop a clearer mental framework for when to apply specific rules, thereby reducing cross-linguistic interference.

Furthermore, curriculum developers should take into account the diverse learning styles of students. Incorporating visual aids, interactive digital platforms, and adaptive learning modules may offer the variety necessary to address individual differences in language acquisition. By tailoring instructional strategies to the specific challenges identified in this study, educators can foster an environment that not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also builds metalinguistic awareness—a crucial component of successful bilingual education.

7. Directions for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research emerge. First, expanding the participant pool to include learners from varying proficiency levels and diverse linguistic backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive picture of the challenges associated with comparative and superlative adjective formation. Longitudinal research designs, tracking learners' progress over extended periods, would be particularly valuable in assessing the long-term effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions.

Second, future studies could incorporate qualitative methodologies—such as in-depth interviews and classroom observations—to better understand the cognitive processes that underlie language acquisition. Such methods would complement the quantitative data presented here and offer deeper insights into the specific error patterns and strategies employed by learners when faced with irregular forms.

Third, exploring the potential benefits of technology-enhanced learning tools—such as interactive apps, online exercises, and virtual classrooms—could prove fruitful. Investigating how these tools might mitigate the challenges posed by irregular adjective forms and reduce cross-linguistic interference would be an important step toward modernizing language instruction.

Finally, further research should examine the role of metalinguistic training in bilingual education. By explicitly teaching learners to analyze and compare the grammatical structures of their native and target languages, educators might help students develop more robust strategies for navigating linguistic exceptions. Such research would not only enhance our theoretical understanding of bilingual language processing but also provide practical insights for curriculum development.

8. Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of the grammatical differences in comparative and superlative adjective formation between Albanian and English. While learners display a strong command of regular forms, the persistent difficulties associated with irregular constructions—especially in English—underscore the need for more targeted and interactive pedagogical strategies. The findings suggest that explicit instruction, combined with engaging, multimedia-based activities, can help alleviate the cognitive burden imposed by irregular adjective forms and reduce cross-linguistic interference.

By situating these insights within a broader theoretical and practical framework, the study offers valuable guidance for language educators, curriculum developers, and researchers. It reinforces the notion that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient when dealing with the complexities of bilingual language acquisition. Instead, teaching methods must be adaptive, context-sensitive, and geared toward addressing the unique challenges posed by the differing grammatical systems of Albanian and English.

In summary, while this research provides a robust foundation for understanding comparative and superlative adjective formation, it also highlights the ongoing need for innovative educational practices and further empirical investigation. With continued research and refined teaching strategies, educators can better support bilingual learners in mastering both the regular and irregular aspects of adjective gradation, thereby enhancing overall language proficiency and cross-linguistic competence.

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