

Comparative morphology across categories: Ukrainian adjectives, adverbs, and deadjectival verbs

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In this talk, I present work from my dissertation (Vyshnevskia 2025). The dissertation is a case study on comparative morphology in Ukrainian, i.e. comparative suffixes that are used to derive the comparative form of an adjective, such as the English comparative morpheme *-er* in *tall-er*. In Ukrainian, this comparative morphology is attested not only adjectives, but also in adverbs and deadjectival verbs, and involves three theoretical challenges, which are the central focus of the talk.

The first challenge concerns **comparative allomorphy**. This term refers to the fact that the Ukrainian comparative suffix appears in two forms: *-š*, as in *molod-š-yj* ‘younger’, and *-iš*, as in *vesel-iš-yj* ‘merrier’. I show that the distribution of the two suffixes cannot be explained in terms of phonology. **The second challenge** comes from **complex adjectives**. These are adjectives derived with an additional morpheme (a so-called *augment*) *-n*, *-k*, or *-ok*, which comes between the root and the agreement, such as *-k* in *čit-k-yj* ‘clear’ and *solod-k-yj* ‘sweet’. The difference between the two forms is the behaviour of this augment in the comparative: while it is preserved in the first case, deriving *čit-k-iš-yj* ‘clearer’, it is dropped in the second one, deriving *solod-š-yj* ‘sweeter’. The same behaviour is attested with *-ok*-augmented adjectives. Meanwhile, *-n*-augmented adjectives always preserve the augment in the comparative.

Taking **the first and the second challenges** into account, there are **seven patterns of comparative formation**, as shown in Table 1. There is a relation between augments and comparative morphology: when the augment is retained, it is followed by the comparative marker *-iš*, and when it is not retained, the comparative allomorph *-š* is used. The same morphological behaviour is attested in adverbs and deadjectival verbs.

nr	POS				CMPR				
	ROOT	AUG	AGR	transl.	ROOT	AUG	CMPR	AGR	transl.
1	molod		yj	‘young’	molod		š	yj	‘younger’
2	vesel		yj	‘merry’	vesel		iš	yj	‘merrier’
3	rozum	n	yj	‘smart’	rozum	n	iš	yj	‘smarter’
4	čit	k	yj	‘clear’	čit	k	iš	yj	‘clearer’
5	solod	k	yj	‘sweet’	solod		š	yj	‘sweeter’
6	žorst	ok	yj	‘cruel’	žorst	ok	iš	yj	‘crueller’
7	šyr	ok	yj	‘wide’	šyr		š	yj	‘wider’

Table 1: Comparative patterns in Ukrainian

Bobaljik (2012) argues that there is a structural containment relation between positive and comparative adjectives, where the structure of the positive is contained in the structure of the comparative. I claim that, structurally, positive adjectives are always contained in the comparative in Ukrainian, although this is not always reflected in the surface morphology, as in (5) and (7) in Table 1. Using the framework of Nanosyntax (Starke 2009, Caha 2009), I explain the distribution of comparative morphemes and arguments in terms of root size and shape, i.e. how much structure is lexicalised and how the features are arranged in their lexical entries.

The third challenge comes from deadjectival verbs. Ukrainian has **two types of deadjectival inchoative verbs**. The first type takes overt comparative morphology, as in *vesel-iš-a-ty* ‘to get merrier’, where the comparative marker is followed by the theme vowel *-a*; I refer to such verbs as Inchoative 1. The other type of deadjectival inchoative verbs do not take overt comparative morphology, as in *vesel-i-ty* ‘to get merrier’, where the root is directly followed by the theme vowel *-i*; I refer to such verbs as Inchoative 2. Even though only Inchoative 1 verbs have overt comparative morphology, I show that both Inchoative 1 and Inchoative 2 verbs have comparative reading and propose that both types of verbs contain the structure of the comparative adjective.

References

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