

# “Comparison of Adjectives in The Cloud of Unknowing” (1)

Yuji Nakamura

## 1. Introduction

There are three degrees for the comparison of adjectives in Modern English — the positive, the comparative and the superlative.<sup>(1)</sup> Although the simple form of adjective is used for the positive degree, the comparative and the superlative degrees can be expressed in two different ways. When the comparative degree is formed by adding the suffix er and the superlative degree is formed by the suffix est to the positive form, this mode is called “Terminational Comparison.”<sup>(2)</sup> On the other hand, when the comparative degree is expressed by the adverb more and the superlative degree by the adverb most, this mode is called “Periphrastic Comparison.”<sup>(3)</sup> Generally, the two comparisons to be dealt with in the present study, are called “Regular Comparison”<sup>(4)</sup> and most of the adjectives can be included in this group, though there are some adjectives which are considered “Irregular Comparison.”<sup>(5)</sup>

## 2. Historical Process of the Comparison of Adjectives

Since it is sometimes said that the terminational comparison has largely given way to the periphrastic comparison<sup>(6)</sup> and that the number of the periphrastic comparisons seems to be increasing in Modern English, it is generally taken for granted that the periphrastic comparison is one of the two methods of comparison in Modern English, and therefore the unstable situation of the periphrastic comparison in the past tends to be forgotten.

By reconstructing the historical process of the comparison

which still existed in Old English — where the comparative degree was expressed by the suffix er (OE ra) and the superlative by est (OE ost)<sup>(7)</sup> — is much older than the periphrastic comparison which emerged during the Middle English period where the adverb more came to be used for the comparative degree and most<sup>(8)</sup> for the superlative degree.

There is some disagreement among scholars about the time the periphrastic comparison was established or became common, contrasted with the terminational comparison. Mustanoja says that the occurrence of the periphrastic comparison was sporadic till the 14th century and it began to increase in the 15th century, though the terminational comparison prevailed in the Middle English period.<sup>(9)</sup> Curme states that the periphrastic comparison gained ground gradually but was not common till the 16th century.<sup>(10)</sup> According to Pound the periphrastic comparison gradually gained ground after the 14th century and became as common as it is today by the time of Shakespeare.<sup>(11)</sup> Taking into consideration such opinions of the establishment of the periphrastic comparison, it may be said that the periphrastic comparison was on the increase until the 15th century and that it became common by the 16th century.

### **3. Some Influences on the Progress of the Periphrastic Comparison**

Latin and French are sometimes pointed to as probable external influences because the construction of the comparison of adjectives in English is in some ways similar to that in those languages<sup>(12)</sup> and especially because French had an intense effect on the language during the period when the periphrastic comparison was beginning to develop.

On the other hand, two major points should be noticed about internal developments. First, during this period English was changing from a synthetic language to an analytic one,<sup>(13)</sup> because some inflections ceased to be used and other function words were adopted in their stead.

Furthermore, the intensifiers “swipor” and “swipost” preceding participles in the comparative and in the superlative degrees in Old English, were replaced by “more” and “most” in the 13th century.<sup>(14)</sup> When this influence reached adjectives (i. e., adjectives proper, as well as participles used adjectivally) the basis of the periphrastic comparison was established.

#### 4. Purpose of this Paper

As mentioned above, the periphrastic comparison became by about the 16th century; however, there seems to have been even greater freedom in the use of terminational comparison and the periphrastic comparison than exists today.<sup>(15)</sup> In other words, the rigid restriction on the use of the terminational or periphrastic comparison seems to have appeared much later.

In this paper I propose to examine the comparison of adjectives mainly in terms of the relationship between the terminational comparison and the periphrastic comparison by concentrating on their use in The Cloud of Unknowing,<sup>(16)</sup> a prose work of mysticism from the 14th century. The following four questions are to be examined for this purpose.

- 1) What is the distribution of the terminational comparison and the periphrastic comparison?
- 2) What is the relationship between the use of these two methods of comparison (Terminational or Periphrastic) and the use of adjectives (Predicative or Attributive)?
- 3) Is the difference in the use of terminational comparison and periphrastic comparison related to whether the adjectives are of Germanic or Romance origin?<sup>(17)</sup>
- 4) Are there any similarities or discrepancies in the comparison of adjectives in Middle English and Modern English in terms of the syllables or the endings of the adjectives?

## 5. The Distribution of Terminational Comparison and Periphrastic Comparison<sup>(18)</sup>

### 5.1. Examples of Terminational Comparison (55 in all)

- 1) souerein (=sovereign)
  - 2.3 þe souereinnest pointe of contemplatife leuing
  - 47.11 þe souereynest wisdom
  - 74.12/3 þe souereynest pointe of þe spirit
  - 132.8/9 þis is one of þe rediest & souereynist tokin
- 3) heiz (e) (=high)
  - 3.6 þe hiezt pointe of þis contemplatiue acte
  - 18.11 þe heizest wilnable þing
  - 31.6 contemplatiue is þe hier
  - 31.6/8 Actiue liif hap two degrees, a hier & a lower; & also contemplatiue liif hap two degrees, a lower & a hizer.
  - 31.11 þe heizer party of actyue liif
  - 31.22 Þe hier party of actiue liif
  - 32.10 þe hizer party of actyue liif
  - 32.18 þe hizer party of actyue liif
  - 32.5 þe hizer partye of contemplacion
  - 32.12 þe hizer partie of contemplatiue liif
  - 32.19/20 þe hizer party of contemplatiue liif
  - 74.12/3 þe hizest & þe souereynest pointe of þe spirit
- 3) ho (o) ly (=holy)
  - 4.16/7 þe minde of þe holiest creature
  - 14.20/21 Bewar [now, wreche ... & holde þee neuer þe holier ne þe beter
  - 47.9/10 þof al it be beter & holier
  - 48.1 þe holiest party of contemplacion
  - 59.3 þe holiest creature
  - 94.17/8 Whiche of þees ben holyer or more dere wiþ God
- 4) parfite (=perfect)
  - 5.9 þer is no parfiter cause to be mekid

- 43.10/11 þer is no parfiter cause of meeknes
- 5) redy (=ready)
- 15.11/2 for þat is þe rediest getyng & keping of meeknes
- 96.10 it is þe rediest wey to dep of body & of soule
- 132.8/9 þis is one of þe rediest & souereynist tokin
- 6) list (=light)
- 16.16 it is þe listest werk of alle
- 23.17/8 in þe listest day of somer
- 7) schort (=short)
- 17.15 it is þe schortest werke of all
- 17.16 It is neiþer lenger ne schorter þen is an athomus
- 18.3 it is neiþer lenger ne schorter
- 28.12 þe schorter it is
- 8) fewe (=few)
- 18.5/6 For euen so many willinges or desiringes — & no  
mo ne no fewer — may be & aren in one oure in  
þi wille
- 9) derk (=dark)
- 23.18 in þe derkist nist of wynter
- 10) low (e) (=low)
- 31.6 Actyue is þe lower
- 31.6/8 Actiue liif hap two degrees, a hier & a lower; &  
also contemplatiue liif hap two degrees, a lower  
& a hiser.
- 31.11/2 þe lower party of contemplatiue liif
- 32.10/11 þe lower party of contemplatiue liif
- 31.21 Þe lower party of actiue liif
- 32.9 þe lower partye of actiue liif
- 31.22/3 þe lower party of contemplatiue liif
- 32.18/9 a tyme of þe lower party
- 32.20/21 a tyme of þe lower partye
- 11) sinfulle (=sinful)

- 44.3 þe sinfulest penaunt in Holy Chirche
- 12) frele (=frail)
- 44.6 þe frelest man
- 13) wrechid (=wretched)
- 44.16/7 þe wrechidest sinner of þis liif
- 14) hom (e) ly (=homely)
- 59.14 þe homliest freende
- 15) gret (=great)
- 64.15 Bot fer gretter trauayle hauen þoo þat ...
- 132.12/3 he hap þan a gretter feruour of desire & gretter loue — longing to worche in þis werk
- 16) wode (=wood)
- 73.18 a woder þing
- 17) seemly (=seemly)
- 113.20 þe whiche is þe seemliest creature in body

5.2. Examples of Periphrastic Comparison (28 in all)

- 1) special (=special)
- 14.4/5 a more special state & forme of leuyng
- 61.14 a more special grace
- 2) wrechid (=wretched)
- 15.1/2 bot þe more wrechid<sup>(19)</sup> & werid, bot zif þou do þat in þee is goodly
- 3) meek (=meek), louyng (=loving)
- 15.3/4 þou schuldest be more meek & louyng<sup>(20)</sup> to þi goostly spouse
- 40.20 I wolde bi þis knowyng make þee more meek
- 4) precious (=precious)
- 20.6 For noþing is more precious þan tyme
- 5) profitable (=profitable)
- 34.5/7 it is more profitable to þe helpe of þi soule
- 6) worpi (=worthy)
- 34.5/7 it is ... more worpi in it-self
- 7) plesing (=pleasing)

- 34.5/7 it is ... more plesing<sup>(21)</sup> to God
- 8) helply (=helpful)<sup>(22)</sup>  
34.5/7 it is ... more helply to alle pi freendes
- 9) vnable (=unable)  
35.1 & makip þee in as moche more vnable to fele
- 10) needful (=needful), speedful (=profitable)<sup>(23)</sup>  
43.14 it is moste needful & speedful cause
- 11) hertly (=cordial)  
45.17 a more hertly sorow
- 12) doelful (=doleful)  
45.17/8 a more doelful desire
- 13) deep (=deep)  
45.18 a more deep sizing
- 14) homely (=homely)  
60.8/9 he schal fele som-tyme — 3e! ful ofte — his  
affeccion more homely to one
- 15) acordyng<sup>(24)</sup> (=according)  
74.10/11 me þink it betir þen of to, & more acordyng to  
þe werk of þe spiryte  
113.9/10 Þe visibilite of þis was moste seemly & most  
acordyng to be upward
- 16) cleer (=clear)  
89.21/2 Not þat his sist may be any tyme, or in any þing,  
more cleer þen in anoper
- 17) liche (=like)  
89.23 bot forþi it is more liche unto hym
- 18) dere (=dear)  
94.17/8 Whiche of þees ben holyer or more dore wiþ God
- 19) corious (=curious)  
105.15 fer more corious þan euer was any seen or herde  
in þis liif
- 20) semely (=seemly)  
109.1 he is þere as him list, & hap him in body as moste

semely is vnto hym for to be.

112.6 it was more semely þat it was upwardes

113.9/10 Þe visibilite of þis was moste seemly & most  
acordyng to be upward

113.19 & þus it is moste semely to be

21) beestly (=beastly), fleschly (=fleshly)

119.9/10 alleoure leuyng schal be more beestly & fleschly  
þen ouper manly or goostly

22) goodly (=goodly)

125.11 Þe moste goodly knowyng of God

### 5.3. Summary

The ratio of these examples (Terminational Comparison : Periphrastic Comparison = 55 : 28) indicates that in The Cloud of Unknowing the terminational comparison is much more frequent than the periphrastic comparison confirming the general tendency of such comparisons in Middle English. However, the increasing frequency of the periphrastic comparison indicated by the number of times it appears should also be taken into consideration.

Another thing which can be observed is that the terminational comparison is preferred when the adjective is attributive<sup>(26)</sup> (Attributive Use in the terminational comparison : Predicative Use in the terminational comparison = 48 : 7).

## 6. Terminational Comparison and Periphrastic Comparison from the viewpoint of Germanic origin and Romance origin<sup>(27)</sup>

6.1. Adjectives which appear only in terminational comparisons (14 in all)

6.1.1 Germanic origin (11 in all)

heiz, holy, redy, list, schort, fewe, derk, low, sinfulle, wode, gret

6.1.2 Romance origin (3 in all)

souerein, parfite, frele

6.2. Adjectives which appear only in periphrastic comparisons



(22 in all)

6.2.1. Germanic origin (12 in all)

meeke, worpi, helply, needful, hertly, deep, liche, dere, goodly, fleschly, speedful, louyng

6.2.2. Romance origin (10 in all)

special, precious, profitable, plesing, vnable, doelful, corious, acordyng, beestly, cleer

6.3. Adjectives which appear in both comparisons

6.3.1. Germanic origin

wrechid, homely, seemly

6.3.2. Romance origin

No example

6.4. Summary

- 1) In the terminational comparison most of the adjectives are of a Germanic origin (Germanic origin: Romance origin=11:3). In the periphrastic comparison words of both Germanic and Romance origins are very nearly used indifferently (Germanic origin: Romance origin=12:10). In other words, almost all adjectives of Romance origin adopt the periphrastic comparison.
- 2) There appears to be a discrepancy in the use of comparison in Middle English and Modern English, in that monosyllabic adjectives such as "meeke," "deep" and "cleer" are found only in the periphrastic comparison not in the terminational one.
- 3) Adjectives ending in ed and ing such as "wrechid," "plesing," "louyng" and "acordyng" (derived from past and present participles) adopt the periphrastic comparison, thus following a similar rule as Modern English.<sup>(28)</sup> The one exception, "wrechid," used in the terminational comparison as well as the periphrastic comparison, only confirms the rule.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence suggests the following 4 points.

- 1) The proportion between the terminational comparison and the periphrastic comparison is 55 : 28 ; therefore, in The Cloud of Unknowing the terminational comparison is more predominant than the periphrastic comparison. This seems to accord with the general tendency of Middle English comparisons. Furthermore, the ratio of attributive use in terminational comparison to predicative use in terminational comparison is rather more preferable when the adjective is used attributively.
- 2) The proportion between words of Germanic and Romance origins in the terminational comparison (11 : 3), and the proportion between words of these origins in the periphrastic comparison (12 : 10) indicate that almost all Germanic adjectives adopt the terminational comparison while most Romance adjectives adopt the periphrastic comparison.
- 3) Monosyllabic words such as “meek,” “deep” and “cleer” are used in the periphrastic comparison rather than the terminational comparison, thus following a different rule than similar Modern English words.
- 4) Such adjectives as “wrechid,” “acordyng,” “plesing” and “louyng” which end with ing or ed and are derived from present and past participles are used almost regulaly in the periphrastic comparison, thus following a similar rule as Modern English.

Finally, the results obtained here form only a small part of the comparison of adjectives in Middle English. Adjectives and adverbs in both regular and irregular comparisons in other Middle English texts also require careful study in order to establish more precisely the development of comparative constructions from Old English to Modern English.

## NOTES

- (1) George O. Curme, Syntax: A Grammar of the English Language (3 vols., Boston: Heath, 1931), 3: 499.
- (2) Louise Pound, The Comparison of Adjectives in English in the XV and the XVI Century, Anglistische Forschungen 7 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1901), p. 2; Hendrik Poutsma, A Grammar of Late Modern English, Part II, 1A (Groningen: Noordhoff, 1914), p. 474; Takanobu Otsuka, Fumio Nakajima et al., The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Linguistics and Philology (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1982), p. 212.
- (3) A. C. Partridge, The Accidence of Ben Jonson's Plays: Masques and Entertainments (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1953), p. 104. See also Pound, p. 2, Otsuka, p. 212, and Poutsma, p. 474.
- (4) Otsuka, p. 212.
- (5) Idem, p. 212.
- (6) Charles C. Fries, American English Grammar (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1940), p. 96.
- (7) Henry Sweet, A New English Grammar: Logical and Historical, Part 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), p. 325. For example, he gives lēofra (=dearer) for the comparative form and lēofost (=dearest) for the superlative form.
- (8) Idem, p. 326.
- (9) Tauno F. Mustanoja, A Middle English Syntax: Part 1 (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1960), p. 279.
- (10) Curme, p. 503.
- (11) Pound, p. 3.
- (12) Idem, p. 2.
- (13) Sataro Ogawa, Kejyoshi (Adjective), English Grammar Series, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1954), p. 117.
- (14) Curme, p. 503.
- (15) Pound, p. 10.
- (16) The Cloud of Unknowing is the only Middle English text examined in the present study. Phyllis Hodgson, ed., The Cloud of Unknowing, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 218 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944; reprinted 1958).
- (17) The adjectives of Germanic origin mainly consist of native English

words and some words from Old Norse, while those of Romance origin are chiefly made up of French and Latin words.

- (18) In the list which follows, the types of comparison are grouped under each adjective. The first word is the Middle English positive degree (e. g. *souerein*), ignoring any variant forms of each word; the word in brackets is the Modern English equivalent, also in the positive degree (e. g. *sovereign*). In the reference to the text, the first number indicates the page, the second the line number in Hodgson's edition.
- (19) As for “*wrechid*,” it is difficult to classify adjectives such as “*wrechid*,” which are derived from present or past participles; however, the context of some of these makes their use as adjectives clear, and hence they can be included in the present study.
- (20) This type of example (more/most+adjective and adjective) is counted as one example not as two. As for “*louyng*” see note 19.
- (21) cf. Note 19.
- (22) If there is no equivalent form in Modern English, another possible word is used which is similar in meaning.
- (23) cf. Note 22.
- (24) cf. Note 22.
- (25) cf. Note 19.
- (26) In his paper “Chaucer ni okeru Keiyoshi no Hikaku Henka” (Comparison of Adjectives in Chaucer) Wakayama Daigaku Gakugei Gakubu Kiyō 13 (1968), 59–92, Makoto Yamane says that in the case of attributive use of adjectives the terminational comparison is more frequently used than the periphrastic comparison.
- (27) When an adjective like “*doelful*” is constructed from elements of two origins (“*doel*”=Romance, “*ful*”=Germanic), the word is classified by the stem (e. g. “*doel*”) not the suffix.
- (28) Poutsma (p. 475) says that adjectives in ing such as *charming* or *taking* now admit only of the periphrastic comparison, and that this applies to participial adjectives in ed such as *pleased* or *tired* as well. Moreover Pound (p. 7) and Partridge (p. 105) have similar ideas on these participial adjectives.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### 1. Text

Hodgson, Phyllis (ed.), The Cloud of Unknowing, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 218 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944; reprinted 1958).

### 2. References

Curme, George O., Syntax, A Grammar of the English Languages Vol. 3 (Boston: Heath, 1931).

Davis, Norman; Gray, Douglas; Ingham, Patricia and Wallace-Hadrill, Anne, A Chaucer Glossary (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979).

Fries, Charles C., American English Grammar (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1940).

Jespersen, Otto, A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles, Part VII (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1949).

Kellner, Leon, Historical Outlines of English Syntax, edited with Notes & Glossary by Kikuo Miyabe (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1956).

Kerkhof, J., Studies in the Language of Geoffrey Chaucer (Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1966).

Mossé, Fernand, A Handbook of Middle English translated by Walker, J. A. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1952; reprinted 1979).

Mustanoja, Tauno F., A Middle English Syntax: Part I (Helsinki: Société Neophilologique, 1960).

Ogawa, Sataro, Keiyoshi (Adjective), English Grammar Series, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1954).

Otsuka, Takanobu; Nakajima, Fumio et al., The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Linguistics and Philology (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1982).

Partridge, A. C., The Accidence of Ben Jonson's Plays: Masques and Entertainments (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1953).

Pound, Louise, The Comparison of Adjectives in English in the XV and the XVI Century, Anglistische Forschungen 7 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1901).

Poutsma, Hendrik, A Grammar of Late Modern English, Part II, 1A (Groningen: Noordhoff, 1914).

Sweet, Henry, A New English Grammar: Logical and Historical, part 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900).

Yamane, Makoto, “Chaucer ni okeru Keiyoshi no Hikaku Henka” (Comparison of Adjectives in Chaucer) Wakayama Daigaku Gakugei Gakubu Kiyō 13, (1968), 59–92.

3. Dictionaries

An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Joseph Bosworth and T. N. Toller (Oxford, 1882) Supplement by T. N. Toller (1921).

Middle English Dictionary, by Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn (University of Michigan Press, 1954– ).

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED): The New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (Oxford, 1888–1921).