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SYNTHETIC-ANALYTIC DRIFT IN ADJECTIVE COMPARATIVE FORMATION AS ATTESTED IN COHA

Abstract: Numerous studies have explored the diverse synchronic aspects of the division of labor between synthetic (inflectional) and analytic (periphrastic) comparison in the English language, i.e., the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors favoring one comparison strategy over the other (cf. Kytö, Romaine 1997; Leech, Culpeper 1997; Lindquist, 2000; Gonzalez-Diaz 2009; Matsui 2010; Park, Jeon 2011; Mondorf 2006; Hilpert 2008; Scrivner 2010; Cheung and Zhang 2016). This paper aims to investigate the phenomenon from a diachronic perspective. The paper analyzes the absolute frequencies of both free and bound comparative morphemes attached to adjectives in American English (AmE) over the last two centuries using the techniques standard in quantitative morphological typology (cf. Greenberg 1960; B. Szmrecsanyi 2012, 2016). The quantitative data on adjective comparatives are retrieved from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA, 1811–2010) and further analyzed with a statistical test of linear regression (95% confidence intervals), with time as the independent variable and the calculated probabilities of occurrence of synthetic and analytic forms as the dependent variables. Our findings show that, similarly to the British English variety (BrE), the frequency of synthetic comparative forms has been increasing over time with respect to their periphrastic alternatives.

Keywords: adjective, comparison, diachronic perspective, COHA.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the English language has been described as a longstanding, continual drift from the synthetic Old English Language (OEL) to the analytic Modern English Language (MEL), and, reportedly, the process is still in operation (e.g. Baugh, Cable 1993: 60; Fennel 2001: 6). The loss of inflection in the nominal, verbal and adjectival paradigms started around the end of the OEL period and it set in motion the long-term processes of a *synthetic-analytic drift* (also referred to as a *synthetic-analytic shift* in, for instance, Mondorf 2006, 2009). Present-Day English is an analytic language that relies on scarce inflectional morphology and,

far more frequently than not, on functional words and word order to code grammatical information (Szmrecsanyi 2012, 2016). Hence, the evolutionary path of the English language is commonly portrayed as a gradual and perpetual transition from syntheticity toward analyticity.

The comparison of adjectives is not an exception. Many authors have claimed that the shift from synthetic to analytic comparison has been actively taking place since the post-Old English era until the present day (Barber 1964: 131; Brook 1973: 180). These observations have been confirmed in numerous studies conducted during the last three decades. Reportedly, synthetic comparison has been decreasing and analytic comparison has been increasing (cf. Bauer 1994; Kytö 1996; Kytö, Romaine 1997, 2000; Gonzalez-Diaz 2009).

The synchronic studies on the use of synthetic and analytic comparison have been significantly more numerous and more diverse, both theoretically and methodologically (cf. Leech, Culpeper 1997; Lindquist 2000; Mondorf 2000, 2006, 2009; Smeds 2007; Gonzalez-Diaz 2009, etc.). However, this considerable stock of research findings has not reduced the interest in this topic. With the introduction of new theoretical and methodological frameworks, it seems that the topic has been gaining momentum.

The diachronic studies predominantly focused on British English (BrE). This article aims to investigate the trends in synthetic/analytic comparison in the American variety of English (AmE), relying on the theoretical and methodological postulates of the contemporary quantitative morphological typology (Greenberg 1960; Szmrecsanyi 2012, 2016). The statistical analysis was conducted on the data retrieved from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) with *GraphPad Software* (online version).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The authors focusing on the use of synthetic (inflectional) and analytic (periphrastic) comparison are primarily committed to exploring the synthetic aspects of the dichotomy. This line of research into the comparative formation focuses on the division of labor between synthetic and analytic comparison by investigating the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors which may favor the use of one comparison strategy over the other (cf. Kytö, Romaine 1997; Leech, Culpeper 1997; Lindquist 2000; Smeds 2007; Gonzalez-Diaz 2009; Matsui 2010; Park, Jeon 2011). As this wave of research was about to reach its peak, the first well-founded doubts were cast upon the statistical methods previously employed. All factors suspected to have an impact on the choice of a comparison strategy operate simultaneously in any given situation, so the effects of multiple factors are always interrelated. Hence, they should be tested with statistical tools sensitive to such mutual interactions, such as multifactorial analyses. These novel observations set in motion a whole

new wave of research (cf. Mondorf 2003; Mondorf 2006; Hilpert 2008; Mondorf 2009; Scrivner 2010; Mondorf 2014; Cheung, Zhang, 2016). The introduction of more sophisticated statistical tools also resulted in the expansion of the repertoire of the analyzed linguistic and extra-linguistic variables.

The re-awakened interest in this topic resulted in a novel theoretical framework whose main hypothesis is that analytic forms reduce the cognitive effort that would otherwise have to be invested by an addressee to process synthetic comparative forms. Drawing on the experimental methods familiar in neurolinguistics, N. LaFave (2015, 2016), G. Kunter (2015), and D. Chua (2018) could not find enough evidence to support the claims that analytic forms require less cognitive effort than synthetic ones. We must note that this, however, does not undermine the validity of the obtained research findings. The cognitive approach is used here only as an explanatory component for the phenomena observed, such as, for instance, that haplology of liquids seems to be avoided. In other words, the statistical data demonstrating the tendency of the disyllabic adjectives ending in *-ly* not to prefer the inflectional suffix *-er* are still valid even though the cognitive explanation has not been confirmed. In addition, even though the differences in cognitive effort while processing synthetic and analytic forms have not been detected for an addressee, the same is yet to be experimentally tested for speakers, i.e., the one producing the forms.

The pioneering studies on the diachronic aspects were conducted by M. Kytö and S. Romaine (Kytö 1996; Kytö, Romaine 1997). The authors compared the results obtained for (Early and Late) Modern English with those obtained for Contemporary English and their results testified to the fact that the analytic comparison first entered the English language around the 13th century.¹ A decade later, the interest in this topic re-emerged when V. Gonzalez-Diaz (2008) found examples of analytic comparison in the Old English texts dating back to the 9th century. More importantly, these diachronic studies portray the evolutionary path of analytic comparison as an ongoing linear upwards trajectory. Logically, the frequency of synthetic comparison is presented as a proportional decline. However, the latest studies in the field challenge such perceptions.

B. Szmrecsanyi (2016) investigated the synthetic-analytic shift in nominal, verbal, and adjectival paradigms. Striving to profile the evolutionary path of the grammatical marking between 1100 and 1900 AD, the author used the *Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English Series*. B. Szmrecsanyi adopted the techniques introduced by Greenberg (1960) and implemented them with slight adaptations. Namely, a gross inflectional index, otherwise known as an *absolute frequency*, was replaced with analyticity and syntheticity indices (AI and SI). They stand for *relative frequencies* of free and bound morphemes, respectively. The find-

¹ Modern English (ME), according to D. Burnley (2001: 211–368) and E. van Gelderen (2009: 155–248) is associated with the period of English language history ranging from 1500–1900.

ings reveal that the relative frequencies of free and bound comparative morphemes form U-shaped trajectories spreading in opposite directions (Szmrecsanyi 2016). Namely, inflected adjectives were in decline during the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries. This fall was followed by an almost proportional increase. Around the 1750s, the bound morpheme reached the same levels it had had prior to this drop. Since then, inflected forms started exhibiting a steady increase in frequency (pg. 107). Almost proportionally, free morphological markers (*more*, *most*, *less*, and *least*) first rose steadily. Since the 1660s, their frequencies have remained quite stable (pg. 106). Two U-shaped trajectories form a spiral-like shape, so B. Szmrecsanyi (2016) coined the term *analytic-synthetic spiral* to describe the trends in the productivity of the free and bound comparative morpheme. These findings prove that there was no linear trend toward less syntheticity and more analyticity. Analyticity was on the rise until the 13th century (the end of the Early Modern English era) and then, the period of a steady decline commenced. Almost the same level was reached at the onset of the 20th century.

T. Säily et al. (2018) introduced the concept of *morphological productivity* into the current research on synthetic/analytic changes in comparative formation. The concept was adopted from H. Baayen (1992: 109–150) who sees morphological productivity as determined by three independent measures: *realized productivity* (number of words containing the selected affix during the whole timespan under investigation), *potential productivity* (ratio of *hapax legomena* with the given affix and all the words containing it), and *expanding productivity* (ratio of *hapax legomena* with the given affix and the total number of these occurrences). The findings of T. Säily et al. (2018) testify to the fact that the morphological productivity of the free comparative morpheme has been quite stable through time and across different social classes. On the other hand, it appears that the productivity of the bound comparative morpheme has been increasing. This rise is attributed to various social factors, such as, inter alia, the inclusion of women in the workforce. The tendency towards synthetic comparison was detected in the following cases:

- (a) when comparatives are pre-modified with adverbials (e.g., *a lot easier*),
- (b) when comparatives are used post-positively (e.g., *make it easier*),
- (c) when comparatives follow *copulas* (e.g., *It is easier*),
- (d) with disyllabic adjectives (e.g., *easy* /'i:zɪ/), and
- (e) when *than* complements are omitted (Säily et al. 2018).

B. Szmrecsanyi (2012, 2016) and T. Säily et al. (2018) indicate that the frequency, i.e., the productivity of the bound comparative morpheme has been increasing in the British English variety. No data are available for American English.

3. METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

This analysis aims to investigate the frequencies of bound and free morphemes in the formation of adjectival comparatives in American English. The quantitative data were retrieved from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA). COHA covers the time period from 1820 to 2010, which is divided into 20 sections, each covering one decade.

The corpus search was performed with the following annotation:

- (1)_jjr
- (2) more ADJ,
- (1)_jjr than
- (2) more ADJ than,

The first set is used to isolate (1) synthetic and (2) analytic comparatives without any additional limitations. The second set of tags narrows the search down to comparatives followed by *than* complements. Even though the presence of *than* complements has been mentioned as one of the syntactic features favoring the use of synthetic comparison (cf. Hilpert 2008; Gonzalez-Diaz 2009; Scrivner 2010), some findings indicate that the opposite is the case (e.g., Lindquist 2000). Also, the analysis of the forms with *than* complements serves as a sort of a validity test. Namely, not all *more* + ADJ forms are analytic comparatives (e.g., *We need [more] [competent people]*). The special emphasis on the structures in which *more* + ADJ are without doubt periphrastic comparatives can serve as an additional test. On the other hand, since there is no definite consensus on the impact of the given complement on the choice of a comparison strategy, this analysis will compare the data obtained for both types of comparative constructions:

Scenario 1: comparatives with *than* complements

Scenario 2: comparatives without *than* complements

The analysis utilizes the quantitative methodology proposed by B. Szmrecsanyi (2012, 2016). However, syntheticity and analyticity indices (SI and AI) for all 20 time sections are converted here into probabilities of occurrence with the following formulae:

$$p_s = \frac{\mu_s}{\mu_s + \mu_a},$$

$$p_a = \frac{\mu_a}{\mu_s + \mu_a},$$

where p_s and p_a stand for the probabilities of occurrence of synthetic forms (p_s) and analytic ones (p_a), while μ_s and μ_a are their absolute frequencies, respectively. These values allow us not to observe the frequencies of the free and bound com-

parative morphemes in isolation, but rather with respect to one another. This paper thus advocates that the complex dynamic between synthetic and analytic comparison should always be observed in their mutual interactions.

The descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using *GraphPad Software*, a free software solution available online. A statistical test of linear regression (95% confidence intervals) was conducted with time as the independent variable and the calculated probabilities of occurrence as the dependent variables. The *p* values below 0.05 are treated as a token of statistical significance.

4. RESULTS

The data retrieved from COHA clearly indicate that synthetic comparison was dominant during the selected time period (1811–2010) when comparatives were followed by *than* complement (*Scenario 1*) and when they were not (*Scenario 2*):

Table 1. *p_s* and *p_a* for comparatives with and without *than* complements.

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2
<i>p_s</i>	0.76	0.84
<i>p_a</i>	0.24	0.16

Scenario 1 (comparatives with *than* complements) and Scenario 2 (comparatives without *than* complements) will further be analyzed independently.

Scenario 1. When the comparative forms were followed by *than* complements, bound comparative morphemes were more frequent than their free alternatives without exception.

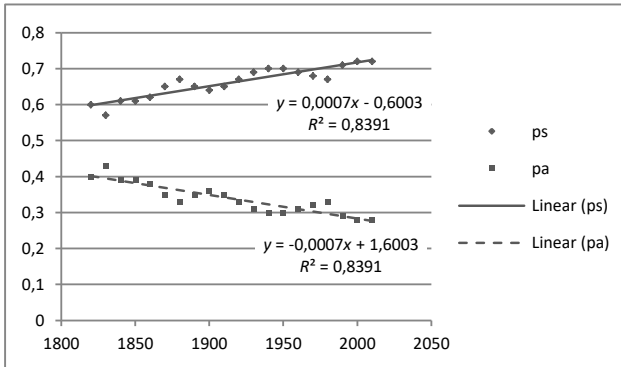
Table 2. *p_s* and *p_a* in comparative + *than* complement structures (1811–2010).

	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910
<i>p_s</i>	.60	.57	.61	.61	.62	.65	.67	.65	.64	.65
<i>p_a</i>	.40	.43	.39	.39	.38	.35	.33	.35	.36	.35
	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
<i>p_s</i>	.67	.69	.7	.7	.69	.68	.67	.71	.72	.72
<i>p_a</i>	.33	.31	.3	.3	.31	.32	.33	.29	.28	.28

The findings indicate that synthetic comparatives had a higher ratio in the total number of comparatives used in 2010, as compared to 1820 (72% versus 60%). The exact opposite was the case with analytic comparatives (28% versus 40%). The values of probability of occurrence for periphrastic comparison fell

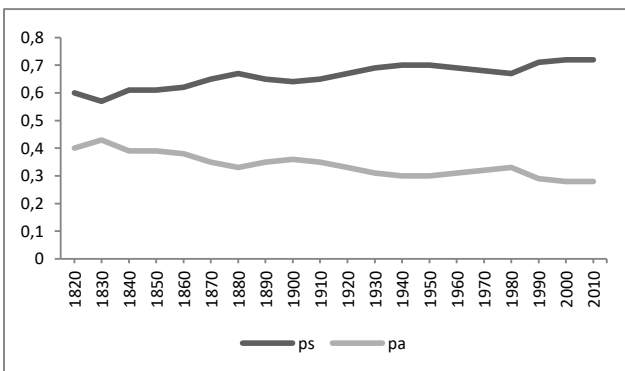
from 0.4 to 0.28 during the same time period. The data were further tested with the statistical test of linear regression in *GraphPad Software* (95% confidence intervals). The following figures were generated by the software:

Figure 1. Linear trends in synthetic and analytic comparison for Scenario 1.



The statistical data prove that there was an upward trend in the use of the bound morpheme, and a downward trend in the use of the free morpheme. With both p -values < 0.0001 , the deviation from the horizontal is statistically significant. The obtained R-squared values (0.8238 for p_s , and 0.8291 for p_a) further indicate a high level of fitness between the regression line and the data set (more than 80%). The values generated for the standard errors of the estimate ($Sy.x(p_s) = 0.01775$; $Sy.x(p_a) = 0.01753$) reveal minimal variations with respect to the presented regression line. In other words, the correlation is quite close to perfect (value 0 represents perfect correlation). Due to the observed unfitness, we should also present the nonlinear lines generated for two data sets.

Figure 2. Non-linear trends in synthetic and analytic comparison for Scenario 1.



Scenario 2. The results obtained for the comparatives not followed by *than* complements are presented in *Table 3*. The share of the bound morpheme in the total number of occurrences of both bound and free comparative morphemes increased by 4% (from 80% in 1820 to 84% in 2010).

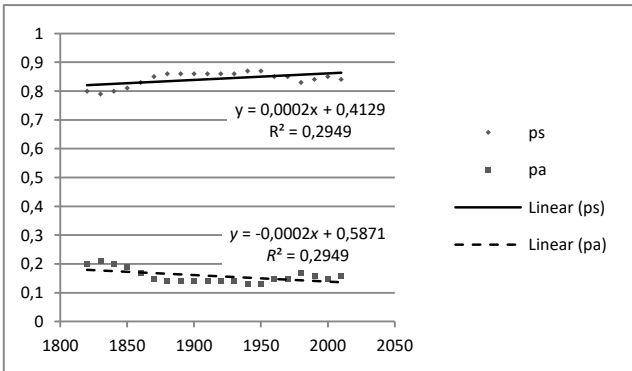
Table 3. p_s and p_a in comparative without *than* complement structures (1811–2010).

	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910
p_s	.80	.79	.80	.81	.83	.85	.86	.86	.86	.86
p_a	.20	.21	.20	.19	.17	.15	.14	.14	.14	.14

	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
p_s	.86	.86	.87	.87	.85	.85	.83	.84	.85	.84
p_a	.14	.14	.13	.13	.15	.15	.17	.16	.15	.16

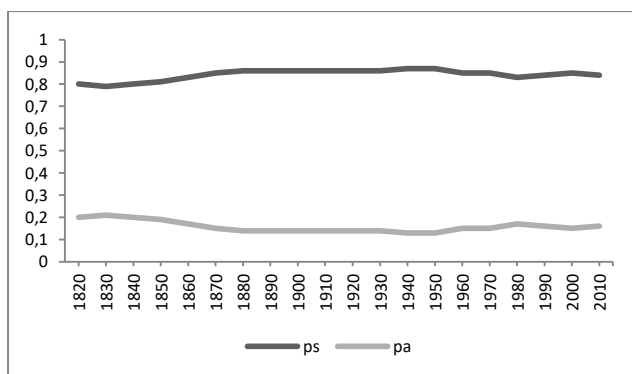
When it comes to the comparatives not followed by *than* complements, the software calculated that both p square values are <0.0001 . Hence, the deviation from the horizontal can be considered as statistically significant.

Figure 3. Linear trends in synthetic and analytic comparison for Scenario 2.



The obtained R-squared values (0.2949 for p_s and 0.3050 for p_s) further indicate that the level of fitness between the regression line and our data set is about 30% for both synthetic and periphrastic comparison. This indicates that the observed trends were not perfectly linear as was the case with comparative + *than* constructions. Due to the observed unfitness, we the nonlinear lines are also generated for these two data sets.

Figure 4. Non-linear trends in synthetic and analytic comparison for Scenario 2.



5. DISCUSSION

The time span analyzed here can be divided into two time periods: before and after the 1970s. It seems that the opposite trends in the use of synthetic and periphrastic comparison were quite proportional until the mid-1970s. The increase of synthetic forms was simultaneous to an almost proportional decrease of analytic ones. These results might indicate that synthetic forms were gaining prominence at the expense of analytic forms in both analyzed scenarios. After the 1970s, the use of synthetic forms continues to gradually fall, only to start to increase in the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, the decrease in periphrastic comparison during the 1970s was more prominent, as was its subsequent rise; however, analytic comparison did not achieve the prior status after this rise, and continued to gradually fall.

One of the most important implications of the findings of this study is that fluctuations are detected during the time period that is relatively short for other linguistic changes to provoke them independently. As indicated in the previous literature (cf. Săily et al. 2018), the changes may be attributed to extra-linguistic factors. Socio-economic factors can be truly seen as main drivers of these changes, such as the increased entrance of women to the workforce.

The findings presented here somewhat clash with those presented by B. Szmrecsanyi's (2012, 2016). While the results of this study show that periphrastic comparison has been declining, Szmrecsanyi's findings indicate that analytic comparison is quite stable. However, we must note that B. Szmrecsanyi (2012, 2016) conducted his research on *Pen Parsed Corpora of Historical English series* which is a database of British English. This analysis was conducted with the data extracted from the corpora of American English. This, however, should not be taken as an indication that there are differences between the two varieties. The reasons for this discrepancy may stem from methodological choices. Namely, B. Szmrecsanyi

(2012, 2016) mentions the use of the POS tags, but it remains unclear whether and how the examples in which *more/most* + *ADJ* are not analytic comparatives and superlatives were eliminated. Here, they were eliminated by narrowing down the search to comparison-specific structures as a sort of a validity test.

Second, free comparison morphemes in B. Szmrecsanyi's (2012, 2016) analyses also include *less* and *least*. These are excluded here because they do not have inflectional counterparts. There are no inflectional morphemes at our disposal in English that could mark comparatives and superlatives of inferiority. In other words, there is no other way to mark comparison of inferiority, but to use the free morphemes (i.e., the analytic model of comparison). The inclusion of *less* and *least*, which do not have inflectional equivalents and are thus not expected to be affected by any growing tendency towards synthetic comparison, might have blurred the true picture. If they had been excluded from B. Szmrecsanyi's analyses (2012, 2016), the author might have obtained somewhat different results which would be more similar to ours.

The results presented here also suggest that an increase in synthetic forms is significantly higher for forms containing *than* complements. Similar conclusions about *than* complements favoring synthetic comparison have been made for British English (cf. Lindquist 2000; Săily et al. 2018). The exact opposite was demonstrated by Hilpert (2008), Gonzalez-Diaz (2009), and Scrivner (2010).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis carried out in this paper contributes to the existent stock of research by revisiting the trends in adjective comparison in AmE. The results of this analysis show that our inherited wisdom about synthetic-analytic shift as an ongoing process still operating today should be revisited. The latest studies show that in the previous stages of language development this process was not linear, but rather spiral-shaped. There were significant fluctuations, and the trends for both types of comparison exhibited parallel and somewhat proportional ups and downs. This analysis on the use of synthetic and analytic comparison in AmE covers only two centuries which appears to be a short time span to see the *synthetic-analytic spiral* at work. However, it clearly reveals that a perpetual suppression of synthetic comparison by analytic means may be something of a myth, at least in AmE. In other words, the data presented here obviously show that we should abandon the narrative on the synthetic-analytic *drift* (or *shift*) in both Modern and Contemporary English.

Instead of confirming that analytical comparison has been rising with respect to synthetic comparison, quite the opposite seems to be the case. Since 1820 to the present day, it is synthetic comparison that is becoming more frequent in language use. The reverse is true for periphrastic comparison. These conclusions are espe-

cially important bearing in mind that AmE is frequently accused of being more prone to analytic changes than BrE, both in comparison of adjectives and in general.

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ПРЕЛАЗАК СИНТЕТИЧКЕ КОМПАРАЦИЈЕ У АНАЛИТИЧКУ У АМЕРИЧКОМ ВАРИЈЕТЕТУ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА У ПОСЛЕДЊА ДВА ВЕКА

Резиме: Рад представља резултате статистичке анализе употребе синтетичке и аналитичке (перифрастичке) компарације у америчком варијетету енглеског језика у протекла два века. Док се досадашња литература углавном бави многобројним синхронизацијским аспектима ове дихотомије, у овом раду употреба синтетичке и аналитичке компарације посматраће се из дијахроничке перспективе. Основни циљ рада је испитивање промена учесталости једног вида компарације у односу на други у изабраном варијетету енглеског језика. У раду се користе истраживачке технике које су општеприхваћене у квантитативној морфолошкој типологији. Као индикатори фреквенности слободне и везане морфеме узимају се индекс синтетичности и индекс аналитичности који представљају заправо релативне фреквенције везане, односно слободне морфеме. Квантитативни подаци добијени су претрагама корпуса *Corpus of Historical American English* (СОНА) који обухвата период од 1810. године до 2010. године, а који је подељен на двадесет временских секвенци од једне декаде. Статистичка значајност опажених трендова испитана је статистичким тестовима линеарне регресије. У те сврхе коришћена је онлајн-верзија софтвера *GraphPad* који аутоматски генерише дате графичке приказе. Добијени резултати још једном ће оспорити традиционалне ставове да аналитичка компарација постаје све чешћа на уштрб синтетичке компарације, тј. да је постојано потискује. Напротив, резултати показују да синтетичка компарација од 70-их година прошлог века бележи сталан раст.

Кључне речи: синтетичка компарација, аналитичка компарација, амерички варијетет, дијахронија, СОНА.