

# Adjective comparison in Renaissance English<sup>1</sup>

Victorina GONZÁLEZ DÍAZ  
*University of Manchester & Universidade de Vigo*

## ABSTRACT

The corpus-based study presented in this paper offers a better understanding of the evolution of double periphrastic comparatives in the Renaissance than the one provided in the literature. Analysing the works of major dramatists and some relevant corpora of the period, I show that the double periphrastic forms were a characteristic feature of elevated registers and upper class speech. In addition, I demonstrate that they did not disappear from the written language – as the specialised literature claims – in the second half of the seventeenth century but much earlier, as a result of the gradual loss of prestige that they underwent from the last decade of the sixteenth century. Finally, the paper suggests that both standardisation and prescriptivism did not trigger but, instead, merely reinforced the social downgrading of the double periphrastic comparatives, and points to the need of taking into consideration factors other than the ones suggested in the literature in order to obtain a more complete explanation of the stigmatisation process.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Double comparatives are hybrids formed by the combination of *more* with adjectives already inflected for comparison (*more friendlier*, *more better*) or by the addition of inflectional endings to suppletive comparative adjectives (*worser*, *lesser*). This comparative strategy has been rather marginal in the history of the language; as the quotations under (1) below indicate:

- (1a) The double forms turn out to be *of sporadic use only*; the real rivalry of the forms is between the inflectional and the periphrastic form proper (Kytö 1996:128 [emphasis added])

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- (1b) At all periods, however, the primary variants have been the inflectional and periphrastic types. Double forms *have always been marginal*. Although once used in the literary language, they gradually disappeared from the written language under the influence of Standardisation. Both eighteenth-century and modern grammarians have condemned them (Kytö and Romaine 2000:173 [emphasis added])

Perhaps because of their status as peripheral comparative structures, double forms have not received much scholarly attention, the standard accounts boiling down to the idea that double forms were frequent in Early Modern English (EModE) literary language, and that nowadays, due to the influence of standardisation and prescriptivism, they survive in popular speech only (see quotation (1b) above; cf. also Pound 1901:49, Poutsma 1914:490, Curme 1931:503, Brook 1958:146, Kytö and Romaine 1997:338).

In this paper I will explore the social distribution of double forms in the Renaissance, defined here, following Adamson (1999:541), as the period from 1500 until 1667 (the year in which Milton's *Paradise Lost* was published). In addition, I will try to give a more precise account than the one provided in the standard literature about when and why double comparatives were restricted to non-standard speech.

The results of this research are based on a 6.3-million-word corpus consisting of the EModE subcorpus of the *Helsinki corpus*, the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence sampler*, the *Lampeter Corpus of Early English Tracts* and the dramatic works of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and John Fletcher.

## **2. SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF DOUBLE FORMS**

Taking into consideration that drama is the genre coming closest to reflecting the social range of language, my analysis of the social distribution of double forms will initially draw on the dramatic works of the authors mentioned above.

### **2.1. Analysis of the data**

I found 40 double comparative forms, most of them (33 instances, 83% of the total number of examples analysed) in Shakespeare's plays. In addition, 3 double forms were found in the plays of Middleton, 2 in the plays of Fletcher and 1 in the dramatic works of Jonson and Heywood (see Table 1 below).

COMPARATIVE	CHARACTER	PLAY
<i>more fairer</i>	King Henry	Shakespeare's <i>King Henry IV</i> , Part II (iv, 5)
<i>more better</i>	Fluellen	Shakespeare's <i>King Henry V</i> (iii, 2)
<i>more sharper</i>	King of France	Shakespeare's <i>King Henry V</i> (iii, 5)
<i>more stronger</i>	Duke of Norfolk	Shakespeare's <i>King Henry VIII</i> (i, 1)
<i>more fairer</i>	Boyet	Shakespeare's <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i> (iv, 1)
<i>more better</i>	Bottom	Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> (iii, 1)
<i>more elder</i>	Shylock	Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> (iv, 1)
<i>more sounder</i>	Touchtone	Shakespeare's <i>As You Like It</i> (iii, 2)
<i>more worthier</i>	Touchtone	Shakespeare's <i>As You Like It</i> (iii, 3)
<i>more softer</i>	Hector	Shakespeare's <i>Troilus and Cressida</i> (ii, 2)
<i>more wider</i>	Troilus	Shakespeare's <i>Troilus and Cressida</i> (ii, 2)
<i>more fitter</i>	Angelo	Shakespeare's <i>Measure for Measure</i> (ii, 2)
<i>more mightier</i>	Angelo	Shakespeare's <i>Measure for Measure</i> (v, 1)
<i>more hotter</i>	Clown	Shakespeare's <i>All's Well that Ends Well</i> (iv,5)
<i>more better</i>	Prospero	Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i> (iv,2)
<i>more braver</i>	Prospero	Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i> (iv,2)
<i>more nearer</i>	Polonius	Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> (ii,1)
<i>more richer</i>	Hamlet	Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> (iii,2)
<i>more rawer</i>	Hamlet	Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> (v,2)
<i>more wider</i>	Duke of Venice	Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> (i,3)
<i>more safer</i>	Duke of Venice	Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> (i,3)
<i>more nearer</i>	Othello	Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> (v,2)
<i>more better</i>	Senator	Shakespeare's <i>Timon of Athens</i> (ii,1)
<i>more kinder</i>	Timon of Athens	Shakespeare's <i>Timon of Athens</i> (iv,1)
<i>more richer</i>	Cordelia	Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> (i, 1)
<i>more worthier</i>	King Lear	Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> (i,1)
<i>more corrupter</i>	Duke of Cornwall	Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> (ii,2)
<i>more worse</i>	Regan	Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> (ii,2)
<i>more headier</i>	King Lear	Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> (ii,4)
<i>more harder</i>	Kent	Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> (iii,2)
<i>more larger</i>	Octavius	Shakespeare's <i>Anthony and Cleopatra</i> (iii,6)
<i>more worthier</i>	Coriolanus	Shakespeare's <i>Coriolanus</i> (iii,1)
<i>more bigger</i>	Theseus	Shakespeare's and Fletcher's <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> (i,1)
<i>more stricter</i>	Mitis	Jonson's <i>Every Man out of his Humour</i>
<i>more calmer</i>	Duke of Florence	Heywood's <i>The Fair Maid of the West</i> (iv,1)
<i>more weaker</i>	King	Fletcher's <i>The Mad Lover</i> (iv,1)
<i>more gladder</i>	Soto	Fletcher's <i>Women Pleas'd</i> (i,3)
<i>more properer</i>	Honour	Middleton's <i>An Invention</i>
<i>more nearer</i>	Galosho	Middleton's <i>The Nice Valour</i> (iii,1)
<i>more fairer</i>	Time	Middleton and Rowley's <i>The World Tost at Tennis</i>

Table 1. Double periphrastic forms in Renaissance drama

Focusing first on Shakespeare's works (a 887,460-word corpus), the majority of the double comparatives are attested in the speech of characters who are distinguished members of their respective societies. Thus, in plays set in courts, double forms occur in the speech of the members of the royal family or important officers of the King (e.g. the Duke of Cornwall, King Lear or

Cordelia in *King Lear*); in plays set in ancient Greece or Rome, they appear in the speech of noble Greeks and Romans (e.g. Octavius in *Anthony and Cleopatra*), whereas when the action takes place in cities, they are attested in the speech of wealthy citizens (e.g. Angelo in *Measure for Measure*; see Table 1 above).

PERIOD	PLAY	NO.	YEAR	SUB-GENRE
	<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	1	1595	comedy
1594-1595	<i>A Midsummer's Night Dream</i>	1	1596	comedy
(3 ex.)	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	1	1596-1598	comedy
	<i>Henry IV</i>	1	1597-1598	history
1597-1599	<i>As You Like It</i>	2	1598-1599	comedy
(5 ex.)	<i>Henry V</i>	2	1599	history
	<i>Hamlet</i>	3	1601	tragedy
	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	2	1609	tragedy
	<i>All's Well that Ends Well</i>	1	1603-1604	comedy
1600-1610	<i>Othello</i>	3	1603-1604	tragedy
(21 ex.)	<i>Timon of Athens</i>	2	1606-1608	tragedy
	<i>Anthony and Cleopatra</i>	1	1606-1608	tragedy
	<i>Measure for Measure</i>	2	1604	comedy
	<i>King Lear</i>	6	1605-1606	tragedy
	<i>Coriolanus</i>	1	1608	tragedy
	<i>The Tempest</i>	2	1611	comedy
1610-1616	<i>Henry VIII</i>	1	1613	history
(4 ex.)	<i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>	1	1613-16	tragi-comedy

Table 2. Distribution of double comparatives in Shakespeare's plays

It should also be noted that most of the double forms occur in tragedies written between 1600 and 1610 (the exception being two double forms in the comedies *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* (see Table 2 above). Interestingly, Holbrook (1994:92) observes something that is very much the line of my findings, namely, that Renaissance tragedy appears to be "an upper-class mode, not only because of its subject matter but in its appeal to a specific kind of spectator." Thus, there are only 4 cases where the double forms are uttered by lower or less noble characters; i.e., the clown in *All's Well that Ends Well* (1 example), Touchstone in *As You Like It* (2 instances) and Bottom the weaver in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (1 token). These examples, nevertheless, reinforce the claim that double comparison is characteristic of upper class speech (see examples (1) and (2) below):

- (1) Bottom Write me a prologue; and let the prologue seem to say, we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and, for the *more better* assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus but Bottom the Weaver  
(MND III,i)

Bottom the weaver is in a rehearsal of a play in which he has the role of Pyramus, a nobleman. The stage play conventions of the period were such that characters spoke according to their social condition (McIntosh 1994:62), and therefore Bottom has to conform his speech to the courtly, refined style that would correspond to his character.

Also interesting are the two instances uttered by Touchtone, the clown in *As You Like It*. Berry (1988:64) describes Touchtone as “the prototype of a dandy.” Indeed, throughout the play he sees himself as having courtly manners, and he tries to put the inhabitants of the woods at a distance by means of using refined speech. Thus, in example (2) below he discusses with Corin the advantages of courtly life. The power relations between them are manifested in the terms of address, as Touchtone is always addressed by Corin as “sir” or “master Touchtone”, while Touchtone himself addresses Corin with a disdainful “shepherd”.

- (2) Touchtone Why, if thou never wast at court, thou never sawest good manners (...) Thou art in a parlous state, shepherd (...)  
Touchtone Your lips will feel them sooner. Shallow again. A *more sounder* instance, come (...)  
Corin Sir, I am a true labourer: I earn that I eat, get that I wear, owe no man hate  
(AYL III,ii)

Further support for the link between double comparison and upper class strata is provided by the fact that double comparatives co-occur with three linguistic features traditionally associated with high style and formal registers. Firstly, Hussey (1982:147), Blake (1983:28) and Berry (1988:xvi) note that high style in Renaissance drama was conveyed though poetic prose or blank verse. Accordingly, most of (Shakespeare’s) double comparatives occur in passages written in blank verse (23 instances, see example (3) below) or poetic prose (4 instances, see example (4) below):<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The exception being the 4 examples where the double comparatives occur in the speech of Touchtone, Bottom the weaver and the clown in *All’s Well that Ends Well*. In these examples, the prose does not have a poetic function but it is used with comic or informative purposes. Another case of a double form occurring in a prose passage is attested in a speech by Hamlet, where the use of prose serves to indicate the madness of the character (Hussey 1982:148).

*'Nothing but papers, my lord'*

(3) Shylock 'Tis very true: o wise and upright judge!  
How *much more elder* art thou than thy looks!  
(*Merchant IV,i*)

(4) Boyet 'By heaven, that thou art fair, is most infallible;  
true, that thou art beauteous; truth itself, that  
thou art lovely. *More fairer* than fair, beautiful  
than beauteous, truer than truth itself, have  
commiseration on thy heroical vassal!  
(*LLL IV,i*)

Secondly, Blake (1983:37,83; see also Hussey 1982:162) remarks that the dummy auxiliary *do* was very frequently used for emphasis in the sixteenth century, and claims that "there is evidence to suggest that in the Elizabethan period it was also used as part of the elevated style." Thus, it does not seem to be a coincidence that some of the double comparatives occur in speeches where instances of dummy *do* are also attested (7 examples, see (6) and (7) below).

(6) Angelo I did but smile till now:  
Now, my good lord, give me the scope of justice  
My patience here is touch'd. I do perceive  
These poor informal women are no more  
But instruments of some *more mightier* member  
(*Meas. II,ii*)

(7) Duke of Venice To vouch this, is no proof,  
Without *more wider* and more overt test  
That these thin habits and poor likelihoods  
Of modern seeming do prefer against him  
(*Oth. I,iii*)

Finally, Blake observes a social difference in the use of the *-th/-s* variants for the third person singular in the verbs *do* and *have*. Although he warns that the use of one or the other form may have metrical reasons (*-th* provides one syllable more than *-s*), he carefully suggests "*has* and *does* may have sociolinguistic overtones indicating a low or comic register" (1983:38). This suggestion seems to be consistent with my findings, as double comparative forms always combine with *-th* variants (see (8) and (9) below):

(8) Troilus Within my soul there doth conduce a fight  
Of this strange nature that a thing inseparate  
Divides *more wider* than the sky and earth  
(*Troil. V,ii*)



## 2.2. Interpretation of the results

In the light of the results obtained so far, one may pose two questions:

(i) *How can one account for the noticeable difference in the social distribution of the double periphrastic forms between Shakespeare and the other dramatists?*

As for this first question, one should bear in mind that these dramatists, although contemporaneous to Shakespeare, were younger than Shakespeare himself. One may hypothesise then, that their work might reflect a change over time, i.e. the *very beginnings* of the loss of prestige of double forms. This hypothesis seems to be consistent with the analysis of the double comparatives in the Helsinki and Lampeter corpora as well as the *Corpus of Early Correspondence Sampler* or *CEES* (see Table 3 below). In these corpora, double forms occur in written domains in which a certain level of education is expected from the authors (i.e., private letters, travelogues, religious and scientific texts, etc) but only until 1615. After this date, no double comparative form is attested.

DOUBLE FORM	YEAR	AUTHOR	BOOK/LETTER
<i>more better</i>	1506	Dorothy Plumpton	Letter to her father
<i>more hyer</i>	1517	Richard Torkington	<i>Ye Oldest Diarie of Engysshe Travell</i>
<i>more dearer</i>	1521	John Fisher's	<i>Sermons</i>
<i>more higher</i>	1537	Jane Messyndyne (Prioress of the nunnery of Legborne to their founder of Legborne)	Letter from the Prioress of the nunnery of Legborne to their founder
<i>more indifferenter</i>	1548	Thomas Vicary	<i>The Anatomie of the Bodie of Man</i>
<i>more feebler</i>	1548	Thomas Vicary	<i>The Anatomie of the Bodie of Man</i>
<i>more happier</i>	1593	Queen Elizabeth	Translation of <i>Boethius</i>
<i>more easier</i>	1602	William Clowes	<i>Treatise for the Artificiall Cure of Struma</i>
<i>more nearer</i>	1615	Gervase Markham	<i>Coutrey Contentments</i>

Table 3. Double forms attested in the EModE subcorpus of the *Helsinki corpus*, the *Lampeter corpus* and the *CEES*

Further support for this claim is provided by Blake, who notes that the double superlatives “most best, most deereſt” in the two quartos of *King Lear* were replaced in the 1623 folio by the simple superlative forms “the beſt”, “the deereſt”, and that all the modern editors ſeem to have followed the folio becauſe it avoided the double ſuperlative forms (1983:3). This leads Blake to conclude that “it is poſſible that the wiſh to avoid this construction [the double comparatives and ſuperlatives] was already felt ſhortly after Shakespeare’s death” (1983:3).

In order to shed more light on the matter, I examined the sections on adjective comparison in several grammars of the EModE period (from 1586 to 1700). The results of this analysis are illustrated in Table 4 below:

EMODE GRAMMAR	YEAR	COMMENT ON DOUBLE COMPARATIVES
Bullokar	1586	×
Greaves	1594	Non mirum si vulgus barbare loquatur
Gill	1619	×
Butler	1633	×
Jonson	1640?	A certaine kind of English Atticism (...) imitating the manner of the most ancientest and finest Grecians
Poole	1646	×
Wallis	1653	×
Wharton	1654	×
Wilkins	1668	×
Lye	1671	×
Coles	1674	×
Cooper	1685	×
Miege	1688	×
Aikin	1693	×
Lane	1700	×
Greenwood	1711	Is it good English to say <i>more stronger</i> ? (...) No, you ought to say, <i>stronger</i> , or else, <i>more strong</i>

Table 4. EModE grammars and double comparatives

Most of the grammars consulted did not make any mention of double comparatives. There are however, two exceptions. Greaves (1594) comments that double comparatives are only used by non-educated speakers. By contrast, Jonson's *Grammar* (1640),<sup>3</sup> ratifies the claim made earlier on, i.e. that double comparison in EModE is a characteristic feature of high style (which, in its turn, is usually associated with upper class speakers).

The fact that these two grammarians contradict each other does not weaken my claims, though. Generally speaking, any process of change is not perceived and commented upon until it has spread quite widely. In other words, the reason why the loss of prestige of double comparatives and their subsequent stigmatisation was not immediately noticed by grammarians may be that both the remark by Greaves in 1594 and the distribution of double comparatives in Renaissance dramatists other than Shakespeare only reflect *the inception phase* of the change. In any case, a clear sign of the fact that this process of stigmatisation was well underway by the second half of the seventeenth century is that in 1672, Dryden commented on the "incorrect" use

<sup>3</sup> Derek Britton (p.c.) informs me that there is evidence to suggest that Jonson was writing this version of the grammar in c1624.

of double comparatives in Jonson and Shakespeare (Bolton 1966:62; see example (12) below):

- (12) I think that few of our present Writers would have left behind them such a line as this, *Contain your spirits in more stricter bounds*  
But that gross way of two comparatives was then, ordinary: and therefore more pardonable in Jonson  
(Dryden *Defense of the Epilogue* 1672, Bolton 1966:62)

Thus, the following diagram summarises the pattern of change that seems to be developing:

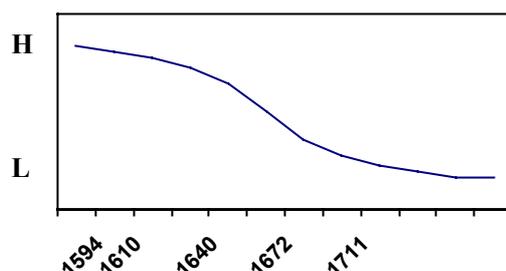


Figure 1. Stylistic distribution of double comparatives<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the Renaissance period, double forms are a distinctive feature of high style. By the time of Shakespeare's major works (i.e. the beginnings of the seventeenth century), the loss of prestige of double forms started to take place. Some association of double forms with high style is still present by 1640 (see Jonson's comment in Table 4 above; note, however, that the grammar may have been written in 1624). Nevertheless, the idea of the "incorrectness" of double comparatives gradually took over, as indicated by Dryden's criticisms in 1672. Soon after that, the stigmatisation of double forms was on its way to completion, as one finds prescriptive grammarians preaching against their use from 1711 onwards (see Table 4 above).

*(ii) What were the factors that led to the loss of prestige and ultimately to the stigmatisation of double forms?*

According to the literature, the disappearance of double periphrastic forms was mainly due to the influence of standardisation and prescriptivism (see quotation (1b) above). However, in the light of what has been presented in

<sup>4</sup> H and L stand for H(igh) and L(ow) style, respectively.

previous sections of this paper, the importance of these two factors with regard to double comparatives should not be overestimated. As some scholars have noted (Willcok 1966:119, Blake 1983, Adamson 1999:539, Nevalainen 2000:334), the process of standardisation had started, or at least, the concept of a standard language was around in the sixteenth century already. Nevertheless, at that time double comparatives do not seem to have been stigmatised yet. Therefore, standardisation may have been a factor that *reinforced* the stigmatisation of double forms in later stages of the process, but presumably it did not *trigger* the process. Moreover, the idea that the prescriptions of eighteenth century grammar led to the social downgrading of double comparatives is not completely accurate either: prescriptive grammarians made the public aware of the supposed incorrectness of the double forms, and in this sense they contributed to their rejection in educated circles, but in doing so they actually did little more than reflect the result of a process of stigmatisation that had started long before.

As for what did trigger this stigmatisation, I would now like to suggest two possible factors.

*(i) The spread of Euphuism to lower classes*

The transition from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century brought about a reaction against the artificial, high-flown styles of the earlier Elizabethan period, among them Euphuism. According to King (1941:xxiv), the reaction against Euphuism started in the 1580s; however, by the end of the 1590s it had spread to the lower classes. Euphuism, as a representative of high style, made use of double comparative forms. I found 9 double comparatives in *Euphuus* and *Euphuus and his England*, a (relatively) high number of examples if one takes into account the small size of this corpus – 152,225 words – as compared to that of the corpora used in earlier sections. Thus, I would like to suggest that the popularisation of the Euphuistic style may well have contributed to the stigmatisation of double forms. On the one hand, it made double forms attractive for uneducated people, since they (i.e. the lower classes) saw them as a sign of refinement. On the other hand, it may have led to a rejection of double forms among the upper classes, as these upper classes consequently started to relate them with a style which had started to be massively used by the non-educated classes.<sup>5</sup>

*(ii) The (early) influence of logic on language*

It is commonly accepted that the eighteenth century brought about the idea that grammaticality could be assessed by the logical analysis of the linguistic

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the occurrence of double forms in the speech of Touchtone or Bottom the weaver, (examples (1) and (2) above).

structures (Leonard 1929:139). However, as the quotation from Sydney demonstrates (see (13) below), the rule that two negatives cancel each other out (which had a great influence in the disappearance of double negation) was already known in the sixteenth century:

- (13) But Grammar's force with sweet successe confirme  
For Grammar<sup>6</sup> says (ô this deare Stella weighe,)  
For Grammar sayes (to Grammar who sayes nay)  
That in one Speech two Negatives affirme  
(Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, 1580-1584;  
Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1995:123)

Taking this fact into account, one may hypothesise that the influence of logic on language had already begun in the Renaissance period, and consequently, that logical judgements might have started to be imposed on double comparatives before the start of the eighteenth century – although presumably not earlier than the first decade of the seventeenth century (see above). This is, nevertheless, a highly speculative hypothesis that needs further work in order to be substantiated.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present paper has demonstrated that double comparatives in EModE were a characteristic feature of upper classes and elevated registers, at least in the drama of the period. In addition, it has suggested that the Renaissance period saw the beginnings of the social stigmatisation of double forms, and has pointed at the need of taking into account factors other than those suggested in the literature (i.e. standardisation and prescriptivism) in order to obtain a more complete explanation of the stigmatisation process.

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'grammar' in the passage refers to Latin grammar; however, taking into account that Latin grammar shaped English grammatical distinctions at the beginning of the EModE period, the rule can be applied by extension to English (cf. Tieken Boon-van Ostade 1995:123).

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*Author's address:*

Universidade de Vigo  
Facultade de Filoloxía e Traducción  
Campus As Lagoas Marcosende  
36200 Vigo, Spain  
victorina@uvigo.es