

SUPERLATIVE PUZZLES*

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1 Introduction

In 2013-2014, Danny wrote a paper with the two of us on the definite determiner *the* (von Fintel, Fox, and Iatridou, 2014). When the editors of this volume approached us about a paper to celebrate Danny’s 60th birthday, we thought it would be a good idea to do something related to the definite determiner, given our previous collaboration. We discussed a few topics and decided to focus on something we didn’t have a clue about (and still don’t).

Many languages do not have a superlative morpheme like English *-est* but instead use other ways to convey superlative meanings. One of these ways is to use the comparative form of the adjective in combination with the definite determiner (DEF+CMP in the coinage of Coppock and Strand (2019)). These languages include Greek, various Romance languages, and many others (Bobaljik, 2012:52ff.). That is, to convey (1), those languages say something of the form of (2):

- (1) Miranda is the tallest student in a class of 200.
- (2) Miranda is the taller student in a class of 200. (# in English)

So, we thought this would be a perfect topic to think about in honor of Danny. The task would be to see if we can combine the meaning of the comparative with the meaning of the definite determiner and have the meaning of the superlative emerge. In addition, the plan was to achieve this while heeding the cautionary note in Bobaljik (2012): we don’t want to create a proposal in which a definite determiner in combination with a comparative adjective *always* yields a superlative meaning, as there are many language in which this does not seem to typically happen, e.g. in English (we will, however, shortly discuss some further thoughts about English).

But soon we were disillusioned. There was no way we could accomplish this in the prescribed short format!¹ So we are now embarking on a much humbler goal. What we will do in this paper

*Happy birthday, Danny!

¹For one thing, there are at least five avenues one might consider towards analyzing DEF+CMP=SUP constructions, the first four of which are helpfully discussed by Coppock and Strand (2019):

1. The definite determiner is the superlative morpheme in disguise.
2. The “comparative” morpheme is ambiguous between comparative and superlative meanings.

is to lay out two subquestions of the larger question about DEF+CMP languages as an invitation to Danny to join us for the subsequent stages of the larger project.

2 A bit about Greek

As alluded to above, Greek is a DEF+CMP language: it lacks a superlative morpheme like English *-est* and the superlative meaning is conveyed by the comparative adjective in combination with the definite determiner. There are two comparative forms of the adjective (synthetic and analytic). For example, the two comparative forms of the adjective *oreos* (“handsome”) are the analytic *pio oreos* (“more handsome”) and the synthetic *oreoteros* (“handsomer”). There are some intriguing differences between the two forms but we will not discuss these here.²

3 The first puzzle

As we already said, in Greek the way to express a superlative meaning is to combine a definite determiner with a comparative adjective. The first question we’d like to discuss is whether this result is “automatic”. That is, when DEF+CMP are combined, do we necessarily get a superlative meaning or is this combination ambiguous between a definite superlative³ and a definite comparative? Surely we can tell the difference in meaning between a superlative and a definite comparative!

Well, it’s actually not as simple as all that. The two meanings collapse in certain cases. Before we examine this question in Greek, let’s set the scene by looking first at English, where there is both a definite superlative and a definite comparative and they look different:

- (3) Virginia is the best candidate.
- (4) Virginia is the better candidate.

Seeing these two forms, it may seem obvious that they have different meanings. But it’s not so straightforward after all.

For English, the usual (possibly mostly prescriptive) wisdom about the distribution of the two forms is that the definite comparative is used when the comparison is between two individuals and the superlative is used when more than two individuals are compared. Otto Jespersen (Jespersen,

3. There’s a covert *than all others* element: *the taller (than all others) student*.

4. There’s a free variable referring to the second “highest” individual: *the taller (than the second tallest) student*.

5. The DEF+CMP combination is a non-compositional idiom when it contributes a superlative meaning. (This is how we understand Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2024) when they talk of “THE+ER” being a “dedicated superlative complex morpheme” that is “the result of grammaticalization”).

We are not convinced that any of these can be the solution, but we will defer an in-depth evaluation to the future, including of the question of whether the definite determiner maybe does not contribute to the semantics of the superlative, but is present merely because the superlative meaning brings about uniqueness, and unique items require a definite determiner.

²Greek also shows the phenomenon of “polydefiniteness” in which more than one definite determiner can appear in a DP. For the interaction of polydefiniteness and superlatives, see Alexiadou, Iatridou, and Pancheva (2025).

³Yes, there are superlatives that are indefinites:

- (i) She needs to marry an oldest/first son if she wants to receive a title of nobility.

See also Herdan and Sharvit (2006). But for the rest of this paper we will focus on definite superlatives.

1909–1949:vol.II 7.771, 7.772, 7.774) notes that “The comparative was originally used when two were compared, the superlative when more than two were referred to.” But “the natural tendency in colloquial speech is to use the superlative in speaking of two and this is found very frequently in good authors”. He points out that Shakespeare in fact prefers the superlative: “whose blood is reddest, his or mine”. And, “inversely, the comparative is sometimes found instead of the superlative in speaking of three”. Some examples he gives: “leaving to the ravens, And wolves, and men – the fiercer of the three – Her myriads of fond subjects” and “the youngest of three brothers of whom poor Sir Charles was the elder”.

More recently, (Hackl, 2009:78) claims as fact that “superlatives are generally blocked by a competing definite comparative when it is established that there are only two entities that are compared”. (Aparicio, Chen, Levy, and Coppock, 2021), conversely, claim that “[w]hile definite superlatives seem to be equally acceptable in the two scenarios, the acceptability of definite comparatives decreases when judged against a [comparison class] of higher cardinality [...]”.

Additionally, we have anecdotal reports of speakers who can routinely use the definite comparative in English to convey superlative meanings even in cases of many more than two individuals being compared. Thony Gillies (p.c.) reports that when talking about a bicycle race where there’s a small breakaway of, say, seven riders contesting the stage, someone might well say “If it comes to a sprint, Sandy has the faster bike”.

Once we turn to plural NPs, it’s even less clear that there are two distinct meanings for plural superlatives and definite plural comparatives:

- (5) The richer people live in the neighborhood on the hill.
- (6) The richest people live in the neighborhood on the hill.

As far as we know, this convergence of truth-conditions between definite plural comparatives and definite plural superlatives has not been discussed in the literature. What seems to be the most promising analysis that emerges from the scant literature on plural superlatives (Stateva, 2002, 2003, Matushansky and Ruys, 2006, Scontras, 2008, Fitzgibbons, Sharvit, and Gajewski, 2008) is that there must be a contextual cut-off point partitioning the set of compared individuals and that *the richest people* will refer to those individuals that are above that cut-off. This seems intuitively correct but it appears now that the definite plural comparative as well refers to those individuals that are above the cut-off. But then how do plural superlatives differ from plural comparatives? Are we losing the distinction between them? We saw that when the domain has two individuals, the definite comparative and definite superlative have converging uses and meanings. The same for plural comparatives and plural superlatives. This convergence of meanings will need to be explored in more detail.

These observations about English make us wonder about the need to drive a significant wedge between DEF+CMP combinations in English and DEF+CMP combinations in languages like Greek. Perhaps a DEF+CMP combination gets a superlative reading more easily than usually assumed, even in English. Maybe English simply has some rather fluid factors that often but not always favor the explicit superlative in some environments.

Be that as it may, consider now the Greek sentence in (7):

- (7) i plusioteri menun se aftin tin gitonia
the.M.PL richer.M.PL stay in this the neighborhood
‘The richer live in this neighborhood.’

Can we tell whether (7) is ambiguous between *the richer people* and *the richest people*? In both cases, the understanding is that we have somehow mentally divided the population into two (not necessarily equal) parts. One part of the population has an average higher income than the average of the other part. In addition, we assert that the part with the higher income lives in this particular part of town. Does it even make sense to ask whether (7) is ambiguous? Actually, it seems that yes! Consider English (8) and (9):

- (8) Miranda is taller than the linguists.
- (9) Miranda is the tallest of the linguists.

It is clear that in (8) Miranda is not a linguist, but in (9) she is. One could say that this is easily seen in English, given that (9) contains the partitive *of* and (8) the particle *than* which sets up a juxtaposition between Miranda and all the linguists. And in fact these particles are selected by CMP and SUP, and they could not have been in each other's place:

- (10) *Miranda is taller of the linguists.
- (11) *Miranda is the tallest than the linguists.

Now Greek has an additional interesting complication here: the comparative and partitive prepositions are homophonous.⁴ Both translate to *apo*. Note that (12) and (13) only differ in the absence (12) or presence (13) of the definite determiner.

- (12) i Miranda ine psiloteri apo tus glossologous
The Miranda is taller than the linguist
'Miranda is taller than the linguists.'
- (13) i Miranda ine i psiloteri apo tus glossologous
The Miranda is the taller of the linguists
'Miranda is the taller of the linguists.'

Despite this fun complication, we can use the partitive/non-partitive distinction to show that Greek DEF+CMP, as in (13), is ambiguous. Imagine that there is a part of Athens where American ex-pats live, who, moreover, as a group are wealthy. In this context, consider the following, which is like (13), but with Americans instead of linguists:

- (14) i Miranda ine i plusioteri apo tus Amerikanus
The Miranda is the richer APO the Americans

One reading of (14) is the superlative, and in this reading, Miranda is an American herself. That is, on this reading it means the same as (15):

- (15) Miranda is the richest of the Americans.

But now consider the following context: We are still in Athens and we want to find the one Greek who is said to be wealthier than the members of the American ex-pat community. We find that this is Miranda, and we want to convey in Greek the meaning of (16):

⁴This homophony between the comparative particle and the partitive particle happens in other languages as well, and may not be accidental. See Pancheva (2006).

(16) Miranda is the one who is wealthier than the Americans.

In the comparative (16), Miranda is not part of the American ex-pat community. Well, the way to convey this in Greek is again (14)! In other words, even though the partitive and comparative preposition look the same in Greek, we can tell when we are dealing with the one or the other.

In short, the DEF+CMP combination in Greek can form either a superlative meaning or a definite comparative meaning. Put differently, the DEF+CMP combination does not necessarily compose to a superlative.

This means that we have to figure out what the difference between the two derivations of DEF+CMP is: when do we get a superlative and when a definite comparative?

In case you wonder about the significance of “we want to find the one Greek ...”: the reason we set the context up this way is because we wanted to license the definite determiner. Without this uniqueness (and existence) presupposition, we would not be able to create a string that is identical to the superlative. In other words, if we had said we are looking for a Greek that is wealthier than the Americans, we would have the simple comparative without a definite determiner:

(17) I Miranda ine plusioteri apo tus Amerikanus
 The Miranda is richer than the Americans

In sum, since DEF+CMP has both definite comparative and superlative readings, we cannot attribute the derivation of the superlative meaning solely to the definite determiner. The question this raises, and which we will not answer, is what else is happening to create the superlative meaning. This is our first puzzle.

4 The second puzzle

Consider the English sentences in (18) and (19):

(18) Mark is the happiest at work.

The meaning of (18) can be that of all the individuals at work, Mark is the one with the highest degree of happiness. Let's call this the individual-SUP(erlative), or i-SUP.

But (18) has actually an additional meaning. Consider (19), which unlike (18), lacks the definite article:

(19) Mark is happiest at work / on vacation/ at 5pm / etc.

Sentence (19) conveys that the spatio-temporal slice of Mark that contains the highest degree of his happiness, is when he is at work, or when he is on vacation, or when it is 5pm etc. Following Matushansky (2008), we call this the stage-SUP, or s-SUP.

While (19) has only the s-SUP meaning, we have found speakers for who (18) is ambiguous between an i-SUP and an s-SUP.

And of course, there are stage-comparatives (s-CMP) as well:

(20) Mark is happier at work (than at home) /at 5pm (than in the morning) / etc

In Greek, the i-SUP reading is only possible with the definite determiner, as we already know:

- (21) *i Miranda ine i pio eftichismeni stin dulia*
 The Miranda is the more happy at-the work
 ‘Miranda is the happiest (individual) at work’

In the absence of the definite determiner, the reading is only comparative, either an s-CMP or an i-CMP:

- (22) *i Miranda ine pio eftichismeni stin dulia (apo oti sto spiti/apo oti i Katarina)*
 The M is more happy at-the work (than that at home/than that the Katarina)

How do we convey the s-SUP in Greek? Consistent with the general pattern in which Greek needs a definite determiner to form a SUP, there is a definite determiner in the sentence. However, the determiner does not agree with the adjective in number and gender, like the one in (21) does. Instead, it is always singular neuter⁵:

For the following, imagine the speaker is a woman and says:

- (23) *ime to pio igiis pu imun pote*
 Am the.N more healthy.F that was ever
 ‘I am the healthiest that I have ever been.’

Consider also:

- (24) *to pio eftichismeni pu echo dhi tin Miranda ine stin dulia*
 the.N more happy.F that have seen the Miranda is at-the work
 ‘The happiest that I have seen Miranda is at work.’
- (25) *i Miranda ine to pio eftichismeni stin dulia*
 The Miranda is the more happy at-the work

Examples (23)–(25) show non-agreement in gender. The non-agreement in number of the definite determiner is demonstrated by the following:

- (26) *To pio eftichismenes pu echo dhi aftes tis ginekes ine stin dulia*
 the.N.SG more happy.F.PL that have seen these the women is at-the work
 ‘The happiest that I have seen these women is at work.’
- (27) *Aftes i ginekes ine to pio eftichismenes stin dulia*
 These the women are the.N.SG more happy.F.PL at-the work
 ‘These women are happiest at work (rather than at home)’

French, another language where SUP is DEF+CMP, shows even less agreement in an s-CMP than Greek. First the baseline cases of i-SUP and i- and s-CMP, which are unsurprising. The i-SUP has a definite determiner that agrees in gender and number with the subject of predication, as well as the adjective:

⁵The definite determiner in (21) also agrees in Case. We cannot say anything about the Case on the definite determiner in (25) because of the well-known ACC-NOM syncretism in Indo-European.

- (28) Maria est la plus heureuse à l'école
 Maria is the.F.SG more happy.F.SG at the school
 'Maria is the happiest (person) at school'

As would be expected from a DEF+CMP language, the i-CMP and s-CMP are like the i-SUP but without the definite determiner:

- (29) Maria est plus heureuse à l'école (que chez elle)/(que Brigitte)
 Maria is more happy.F.SG at the school (than at home)/(than Brigitte)
 'Maria is happier at school (than at home)/(than Brigitte).'

Now, for the s-SUP reading to emerge, it is not surprising that we need a definite determiner, as this is how French SUPs are put together. But like in Greek s-SUPs, this determiner does not agree in gender and number with the subject of predication. In (30), the determiner is NON-F, even though the subject *Maria* is feminine⁶. In (31), the determiner is singular, even though the subject is plural. So far French and Greek are alike in sharing this surprising pattern.

Where French and Greek differ is the agreement on the adjective. In Greek s-SUP, the determiner fails to agree but the adjective does agree with the subject, as can be seen in (23)–(27). In French s-SUP, the determiner does not agree, as we saw above, and with respect to agreement on the adjective, we've found variation. There are speakers who accept (30), where the subject is feminine but the adjective is NON-FEM and (31), where the subject is plural, but the adjective is singular.

- (30) Maria est le plus heureux à l'école
 Maria is the more happy.N.SG at the school
 'Maria is happiest at school'
- (31) Ils sont le plus jovial à l'école
 They are the.SG more cheerful.N.SG at the school
 'They are most cheerful at school'

But there are also speaker who accept agreement on the adjective, as in the following example from Silberlight (1965):

- (32) C'est au milieu de ses enfants qu'une mère est le plus heureuse
 It is in the midst of her children that a mother is the.M.SG more happy.F.SG
 'It is in the midst of her children that a mother is happiest'

A quick summary about s-SUP in tabular form:

	s-SUP	
Greek	Determiner does not agree	Adjective agrees
French	Determiner does not agree	%Adjective does not agree

So there are many questions to be answered here. Of course the first question is still the role of the definite determiner: does it (and if so, how) contribute to the meaning of a superlative or is

⁶Greek has 3 genders, and the definite determiner in s-SUPs is neuter, which may well be the default. French has only 2 genders, and the NON-F may well be the default.

it there because the superlative yields uniqueness and in French and Greek unique DPs require the definite determiner?

Another question is why the definite determiner in i-SUPs agrees with the subject but in s-SUPs it does not. There may be an answer to the first part of this question in Matushansky (2008). Matushansky argues convincingly that in what we call here i-SUPs, the adjective is always attributive. That is, a sentence like (33), is underlyingly always like (34):

(33) Miranda is the smartest

(34) Miranda is the smartest [$\emptyset$]_N

She reaches this conclusion on the basis of a number of languages. Matushansky proposes an explanation for why this might be the case, but the details of this explanation are not relevant for us right now. Matushansky also proposes a mechanism via which agreement is mediated anaphorically by the [$\emptyset$]_N, which she assimilates to the ways a pronoun agrees in features with a discourse antecedent. Again, whether she is right on the specifics of the mechanism is not relevant right now. What is relevant is, that in an i-SUP, the definite determiner agrees with the subject due to the presence of the null noun.

What about an s-SUP? Matushansky runs her tests for a null noun only over individuals, not over stages. But if one were to push her line that all superlative adjectives are attributive adjectives, then one would be forced to say that also in an s-SUP there is a null noun. This null noun, though, would not be agreeing with the subject but would be standing for either something that doesn't have phi-features, which triggers default features on the definite determiner, or something whose features are neuter or non-feminine (e.g. a null noun standing for a stage? or a degree? one's imagination can roam here). But even if we come to terms with such answer, the question of Greek, as opposed to French, stands out, because there the definite determiner is neuter but the adjective agrees with the subject, so what could the features of the null noun be?

And French adds even more fun to the story! As we just said, in a French s-SUP neither the definite determiner nor the adjective agrees with the subject. One would expect then, that the s-CMP would consist of a non-agreeing adjective without the definite determiner, given that French is a DEF+CMP language. But that is not so:

(35) *Maria est plus heureux à l'école que chez elle
Maria is more happy.NON-F at the school than at her

(36) *Ils sont plus jovial à l'école que chez eux
They are more cheerful.SG at the school than at them

In the s-CMP, unlike in the s-SUP, the adjective does agree with the subject:

(37) Maria est plus heureuse à l'école que chez elle
Maria is more happy.F at the school than at her

(38) Ils sont plus joviaux à l'école que chez eux
They are more cheerful.PL at the school than at them

In other words, in French s-CMP and s-SUP, the presence of agreement covaries with the absence of the definite determiner. (In Greek nothing like this can be seen, as there is adjectival agreement with the subject, even in an s-SUP.)

That s-SUPs lack agreement on the definite determiner can also be seen in languages whose superlatives do not consist of DEF+CMP. Dutch has the superlative morpheme *-st(e)*. Moreover, this language has two definite determiners in the singular: *het* for neuter nouns and *de* for non-neuter nouns. In attributive position, the definite determiner is followed by an adjective that ends in *-e* (concord or agreement). In predicative position there is no *-e*:

- (39) *het kleine kind*
the small child
- (40) *het kind is klein*
the child is small
- (41) *de grote tafel*
the big table
- (42) *de tafel is groot*
the table is big

But when the adjective is superlative, it takes *-e* also in (apparent) predicative position, which is one of Matushansky's arguments that superlative adjectives are always attributive:

- (43) *De tafel is de grootste* [$\emptyset$]_N
- (44) *Het kind is het kleinste van de klas*

It is unsurprising, then, that in an i-SUP, the presence of *-e* is required:

- (45) *De vrouw is de gelukkigste* [$\emptyset$]_N op werk
The woman is the happiest (person) at work

But in an s-SUP, the definite determiner on the adjective is not *de*, which would be the expected definite determiner given the subject (and which also appears on the subject), but instead it is the neuter *het*. Moreover, the superlative adjective, does not take *-e*:

- (46) *De vrouw is het gelukkigst op werk*
the woman is the happiest at work

So Dutch is like Greek and French in using an "inappropriate" definite determiner in an s-SUP. But it is more like French than Greek, in that no agreement/concord *-e* appears on the superlative adjective, despite the fact that nouns with *het* take *-e* in the superlative, as in (44).

German, which, like Dutch, is also not in general a DEF+CMP language, shows complete invariance: there is no agreement at all. Instead, the stage-SUP reading is conveyed with a PP meaning "at the highest degree of X-ness":

- (47) *Sie sind am glücklichsten bei der Arbeit*
They are at-the happiest at the work
'They are happiest at work.'

Catalan is like German: s-, i-CMP are very much alike, down to the optional presence of "expletive" negation, but there is no s-SUP. Here are the s-, i-CMP cases:

- (48) En Joan és més feliç que (no pas) la Maria
 the Joan is more happy than (NEG) the Maria
 ‘Joan is happier than Maria’
- (49) En Joan és més feliç a casa que (no pas) a la feina
 the Joan is more happy at home than (NEG) at the work
 ‘Joan is happier at home than at work’

The i-SUP is as expected:

- (50) La Maria és la més feliç de la classe
 the Maria is the more happy of the class
 ‘Maria is the happiest person in class’

But as in German, the s-SUP needs a paraphrase:⁷

- (51) Quan la Maria és més feliç és quan és a classe
 When the Maria is more happy is when she is in class
 ‘intended: Maria is happiest in class’

So, our second puzzle is: why is the s-CMP “well-behaved” with respect to agreement but the s-SUP is not? The s-SUP seems problematic also beyond agreement, as in German and Catalan.

Finally, before closing this section, we would like to note an additional difference between i-SUP and s-SUP, namely in the possibility of anaphoric reference to degrees.

- (52) A: Miranda is the tallest (student) in her class.
 B: Oh yeah? ???How tall is that?
 B’: Oh yeah? How tall is she?
- (53) A: Miranda is the tallest/happiest on Sundays.
 B: Oh yeah? How tall/happy is that?

We found the same contrast in the other languages we tested.

5 Questions raised

DEF+CMP languages raise the question of how the meaning of a superlative comes about from the definite-article-plus-comparative-adjective combination. Of course this larger question breaks down to a number of sub-questions. One of these is whether there is a clear distinction between those languages that are DEF+CMP, like Greek and those that are supposed to not be, like English. Interestingly, we saw that in English, in certain environments, the meaning of the definite-article-plus-comparative adjective combination collapses with the meaning of a superlative. How then

⁷The same periphrastic avenue can be taken in Greek:

- (i) i Miranda ine sta pio eftichismena tis stin dulia
 the Miranda is at-the.N.PL more happy.N.PL her.F.SG at work
 ‘Miranda is at her happiest at work’

Note the lack of agreement: Miranda is feminine singular but the predicate and the determiner are plural neuter.

do English and Greek differ? We also saw that in Greek, the definite-article-plus-comparative adjective-combination does not always lead to a superlative semantics but can just as easily lead to a definite comparative. How do the two derivations differ then?

We also saw that in two DEF+CMP languages (Greek and French) and one non-DEF+CMP language (Dutch), there are agreement mismatches in s-SUPS. Specifically, the definite determiner, while obligatorily present, does not agree in features with the subject of predication. This raises several questions, including what the domain of the standard of comparison is.

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