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### Comparatives, Superlatives and Definiteness in Greek<sup>1</sup>

- Languages with dedicated SUP morphemes: English *most/-est* (Germanic, Slavic)
- Greek: no dedicated SUP morphemes (see also Romance, Arabic, Albanian, Celtic, Upper Austrian, Maltese, Middle Armenian, Livonian, Neo-Aramaic, Klón, a Papuan language of Indonesia, Misanla Totonac, an indigenous language of Mexico, according to Bobaljik 2012:)

- (1) a. ER (comparative) + Adj + embedding inside a definite DP  
b. ER (comparative) + Adv  
c. ER (comparative) + MANY/MUCH (Adv or embedding inside a definite DP)

- Crosslinguistic variation among languages regarding **presence vs absence of THE** with postnominal, predicative and adverbial superlatives:

- (2) a. **THE MORE Adj** (French, Romanian)  
b. **Ø MORE Adj** (all lang. other than Fr. and Rom. we know about)

#### • Questions:

- Do French and Greek superlatives rely on the same syntactic configuration or not?
- How do those syntactic configurations compare with English superlatives (dedicated Sup morpheme)?
- If the syntax of superlatives varies crosslinguistically how do we build similar/identical meanings from different syntactic structures?

- **Previous analyses for Romance languages:** Loccioni (2018), Giurgea (2024), Cornilescu & Giurgea (2013), Dobrovie-Sorin (2023)

#### • Proposal in this article

- (3) a. French<sup>2</sup> has a **dedicated morphologically complex SUP marker of the form [THE ER]**  
b. Greek has a **bare ER** (‘bare’ = **without THE; without *than*-complement**) that gets **SUP meaning**  
(i) **via a dependency rel. with [D<sup>o</sup>THE]** (DP-internal Adj’s, definite relative clauses)  
(ii) **covert/overt *από όλους* ‘than all (i.e., than all others)’**  
c. Greek has a **SUP marker of the form [THE ER] for MANY/MUCH**

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<sup>2</sup> The proposals we make for French extend to Romanian, not illustrated here for reasons of space. See Dobrovie-Sorin (2023), Giurgea (2024).

# 1. Crosslinguistic Variation of Comparative-based Superlatives

## 1.1 The data (French, Italian)

• Kayne (2005) and Loccioni (2018) observed several interesting differences between French and Italian superlatives.

- Below: (i) we reproduce the data from Loccioni (2018)  
(ii) we provide Greek ex's that show that Greek behaves on a par with Italian

• The superlative interpretation of the comparative **forms of postnominal Adj's** (see (4)) and of **Adv's** ((see (5)a)) requires THE in French but bans THE in Italian:

- (4) a. la fille **\*(la) plus pauvre**  
b. la ragazza **\*(la) più povera** 'the poorest girl'

- (5) a. la secrétaire qui écrit **\*(le) mieux** 'the secretary who writes best'  
b. la segretaria che scrive **(\*il) meglio**

• With respect to adverbs, Greek behaves like Italian (THE is impossible for the adverbial superlative reading. The example is acceptable with the meaning 'the best (things)')

- (6) η γραμματέας που γράφει **(\*το/\*τα) καλύτερα**  
the.FS secretary who writes (the.NS/NP) better

Postnominal adjectives require the definite article inside definite DPs anyway ('polydefiniteness'), see Alexiadou (2014) and references therein, so the presence of the article in (7)a is not due to the superlative, contrary to French:

- (7) a. το κορίτσι **\*(το) πιο φτωχό**  
the girl the more poor  
b. το κορίτσι **\*(το) φτωχό**  
the girl the poor  
c. la fille **(\*la) pauvre**

With prenominal superlatives, polydefiniteness is optional:

- (8) το πιο φτωχό **(το) κορίτσι**  
the more poor the girl

The superlative reading arises in Italian only when the comparative is **embedded inside a definite DP** (see (4)b) or **inside a relative clause headed by a definite DP** (see (5)b). When this condition is not satisfied, only the comparative reading is possible:

- (9) Maria scrive meglio. 'Maria writes better/\*best'

No such constraint holds in French, where the comparative vs superlative meaning depends on absence/presence of THE:

(10) Marie écrit mieux/**le** mieux. ‘Maria writes better/best’

## 1.2 Superlative Adverbs

Our informants reported that the preferred default interpretation of (11)a-b is comparative:

- (11) a. Η Μαρία γράφει πιο καλά  
the Maria writes more well  
b. Η Μαρία γράφει καλύτερα.  
the Maria writes better

In order to get the superlative reading:

**(i) one may add *από όλους* ‘of all’**

**(ii) in a context in which we discuss about who writes best** (see (12), where intonation and the fronting of topical material make clear this contextual setting:

- (12) Πιο καλά, γράφει η ΜΑΡΙΑ!!!  
more well writes the Maria

**(iii) embedding inside a relative clause**

In (13) the superlative interpretation becomes salient:

- (13) Αυτή που γράφει καλύτερα είναι η Μαρία  
she who writes better is the Maria

• Imagine that (11), (12) and (13) are uttered after (14):

- (14) Ioana writes well.

Our informants say that in the context of (14): (11) means ‘better than Ioana’ whereas (13) means ‘best out of a contextually provided comparison group, e.g., students’. **What about (12)?** We guess that it has a comparative meaning, but we would like to have your confirmation

## 1.3 Superlative adjectives in predicate positions

• **Embedding of comparatives inside relatives** headed by a definite DP => superl. reading

- (15) a. l’anno in cui Maria fu **più felice**. ‘the year in which Mary was happiest’  
b. Maria fu **più felice** in 2012. ‘Maria was happier/\*happiest in 2012’

Giurgea (2022, 2024) observes that Loccioni’s condition might be too strong: embedding inside a cleft or a question is sufficient to license the superlative meaning of comparatives for most of his Italian informants. The data needs to be further checked.

- **Greek comparative adjectives in predicate positions**

(16) Maria was richest in 1995 (meaning: richer than in any other years).

- Our informants report that (17) is somewhat problematic as a translation of (16)

(17) Η Μαρία ήταν πιο πλούσια το 1995  
the Maria was more rich the 1995

- They mostly get a comparative interpretation. They need to clarify the superlative interpretation by adding ‘than/of all years’ (από όλες τις χρονιές).

- By fronting ‘πιο πλούσια’ it is easier to get a superlative interpretation in the right context.

(18) Πιο πλούσια ήταν **το 1995** η Μαρία!

- In the context of (19) the example in (20) is interpreted as a comparative, i.e., ‘richer/happier/more successful than in 2000’:

(19) Maria was rich/happy/successful in 2000.

(20) Αλλά η Μαρία ήταν πιο πλούσια/ ευτυχισμένη/ επιτυχημένη το 1995  
but the Maria was more rich/ happy/ successful the 1995

- If we want to express ‘richest/happiest/most successful in 1995’ (i.e. richer than in any other year) we can use embedding inside a relative clause headed by a definite DP:

(21) Το 1995 είναι η χρονιά που η Μαρία ήταν πιο πλούσια/ευτυχισμένη/επιτυχημένη  
‘1995 is the year when Maria was richest/happiest/most successful’

- **The comparative is easier to interpret as a superl in wh-questions**

(22) When was Greece richest?  
Πότε ήταν η Ελλάδα πιο πλούσια;  
when was the Greece more rich

- **Both readings are available but in out of the blue context, the superlative is most salient**

- For examples of the type in (17) the acceptability judgments vary from one speaker to the other. One informant also finds (11)a a bit better than (11)b (in the sup. reading)

- What seems to be going on: some speakers introduce a silent ‘than all the others’. If the context prevents this insertion (and instead an anaphoric complement of the comparative is tacitly supplied) the superlative reading is ruled out.

## 1.4 Quantity superlatives

For **adnominal quantity superlatives**, Gr. and It. do not behave alike. Greek patterns with French, using the definite article:

- (23) a. Ποιος έχει **τους** {περισσότερους/ πιο πολλούς} φίλους;  
who has the more more many friends  
b. Qui a **le** plus d'amis? (Fr.)  
c. Chi ha **(\*i)** più amici? (It.)  
'Who has the most friends?'

Note also that THE+MORE can also have a proportional (majority) interpretation in Greek, which is not found in the Romance languages, with the exception of Romanian and, partially, Italian (where the proportional interpretation is restricted to the partitive construction, *i più di ...* 'the more of...', and is rather bookish/obsolete), see Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea (2021).

For **adverbial quantity superlatives**, Greek lacks the article, following the general adverbial pattern => it patterns again with Italian, differing from French:

- (24) a. Ο Γιάννης μιλάει (\*το) {περισσότερο/πιο πολύ} (από όλους)  
the Janis speaks the more more much of all  
b. Jean parle **le** plus (Fr.)  
c. \* Gianni parla il più (It.)  
c'. Gianni parla più = comparative: 'Gianni speaks more'  
c''. Gianni è quello che parla di più (fra i miei parenti)  
Gianni is the-one who speaks of more among the my relatives  
'John speaks the most (, among my relatives)'

### • Possible analyses for Greek adnominal quantity superlatives, see (23)a

- (i) THE is a SUP marker specialized for adnominal quantitatives  
(ii) THE is the definite article (sitting in D°)

• According to (ii), **Greek quantity superlatives pattern with quality superlatives** (see the Greek ex's (8) in § 1.1):

• This hypothesis, which we think correct, raises a number of questions that need to be addressed:

- (25) a. **The superlative of MOST can only have a 'relative' reading** (as opposed to an absolute reading). **Relative readings of superlatives have indefinite-like properties** (see Szabolcsi 1986, Heim 1999), **which need to be reconciled with the presence of THE** (Coppock & Beaver 2014, Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea 2023).

b. Why is it that Italian (or Spanish), which otherwise patterns as Greek, cannot use THE MORE with a superlative meaning?

• We do not have an answer to (25)b.

- An important argument in favor of (ii) is provided by Engl. ex's in which THE precedes MORE, which contrasts with a 'bare' MORE:

- (26) a. Who has **more** friends? (implicit *than*-complement, 'than Mary')
- b. Who has **the more** friends? (**than the other (of two persons)**)
- c. Who has **the most** friends? (**than all the others**)

- In Engl., the comparative *the more* shown in (26)b is restricted to comparing **two people** wrt the number of friends they have. When *the most* is used, as in (26)c, the number of people we compare is unrestricted. This difference between the more and the most is not required by the theory of superlatives or comparatives, it is merely an **idiosyncratic differentiation of the semantics of more and most when embedded inside a definite DP, due the fact that both items exist in Engl.**

- In Greek both readings of (26)b-c are rendered by (23)a.

### 1.5 Loccioni's (2018) analysis

Loccioni (2018:74): French and Italian superlatives are structurally identical: DegP-internal [D<sup>o</sup>THE] or [D<sup>o</sup>Ø]

(27) [AP<sub>DegP</sub>[D<sup>o</sup>THE] ER DEGREE] Adj] French

(28) [AP<sub>DegP</sub>[D<sup>o</sup>Ø] ER DEGREE] Adj] Italian

(29) The DegP-internal THE functions as a max operator over degrees, i.e., it picks up the unique maximal degree.

- In Italian, [D<sup>o</sup>Ø] inside DegP in (28) => needs to be licensed by an upper [D<sup>o</sup>THE]
- In French [D<sup>o</sup>THE] is overt => unconstrained distribution

### Problems with Loccioni's proposal

(i) **Loccioni invokes Krasikova's (2012) proposal** as 'similar in spirit' to her own analysis. But:  
 - Krasikova's proposal was meant to account for English relative readings of superlative-dedicated morphemes

(30) Who climbed the highest mountain?  
 Absolute reading: the mountain higher than any other out of a context-given set of mountains  
 Relative reading: the mountain higher than the mountains climbed by other people

Krasikova's attempt was to 'get rid' of the definite article as the determiner of the head N (because on their relative reading, superlative-embedding DPs show indefinite-like interpretations)

- Loccioni's proposal is meant for Romance superlative (both absolute and relative) readings of THE MORE
- Loccioni says nothing about why Krasikova's proposal (restricted to relative readings) should be able to cover all (both absolute and relative) readings of Romance
- Krasikova's proposal is itself problematic (Croitor & Giurgea 2016, Dobrovie-Sorin 2021)

(ii) **Loccioni does not provide an explicit compositional analysis**

(iii) **Loccioni makes some wrong predictions** (as observed by an anonymous reviewer of Going Romance):

- (31) a. **Gli amici più poveri**  
       'the poorest friends'  
       b. **Gli amici di persone più povere**  
       THE friends of people more poor (not a superlative)

In both (31)a and (31)b ER is C-commanded by THE, but only (31)a has a superlative meaning. That C-command indeed holds in (31)b is shown by the possibility of licensing NPIs by a NegQ in a position that is structurally identical to that of the definite DP in (31)b:

- (32) Nessun amico di persone {con alcuno scrupolo / che abbiano mai sofferto}  
       no friend of people {with any scruple / who have ever suffered} (NPI licensed)

• We presume/suspect the same holds for Greek:

- (33) a. οι πιο φτωχοί φίλοι (superlative)  
       the more poor friends  
       b. οι φίλοι πιο φτωχών ανθρώπων (comparative, \*superlative)  
       the friend more poor.GEN people.GEN

## 2. Previous analyses of superlative-dedicated morphemes

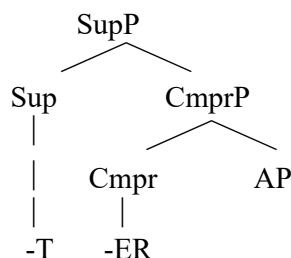
The fact that in French SUP meaning is built by combining THE with ER can be taken as evidence in favor of Bobaljik's (2012) decompositional analysis

### 2.1 Decomposing Superlative-dedicated Morphemes (EST)

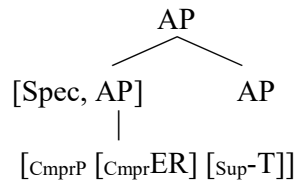
(34) **The superlative contains the comparative operator, both morphologically and semantically.**

(Bobaljik 2012, Szabolcsi 2012, Dunbar & Wellwood (2016), Al-Bitar 2019)

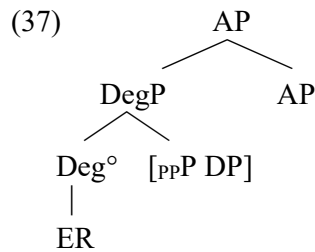
(35) Bobaljik (2012): two 'nesting' functional heads, Comp and Sup



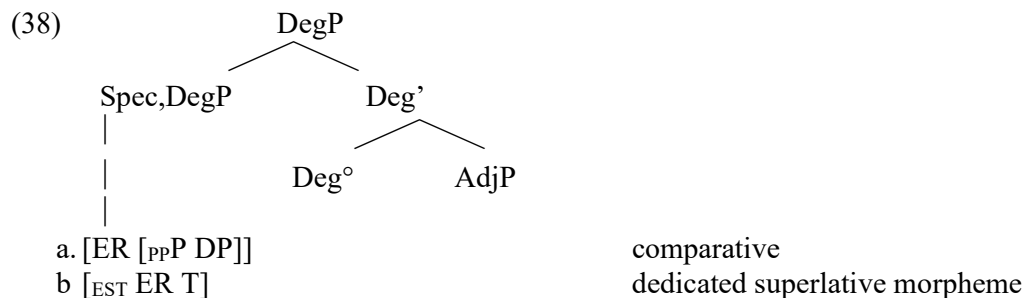
(36) Dunbar & Wellwood (2016): **Cmpr and Sup form a constituent sitting in Spec,AP**



- Spec,AP can host either [Sup Cmpr] (yielding superlatives) or [Cmpr] (yielding comparatives)
- Bresnan (1973), Heim (2000), and Deal & Hohaus (2019): **DegP** headed by ER is an **adjunct**



- Our suggestion (not crucial for what follows; (36) or (37) would also work for us)



## 2.2 Deriving superlative meanings from comparative meanings

• **Is there any semantic composition that captures the morphological decomposition of [EST] into [ER] + [-T]?**

- Attempts can be found in Gajewski 2010, Krasikova 2012, Bobaljik (2012) and Dunbar & Wellwood (2016).
- Dobrovie-Sorin (2023) argues that these attempts are problematic and proposes that

**(39) EST is the result of the grammaticalization of ER + (THAN ALL).**

## 3. Back to languages without a dedicated SUP morpheme

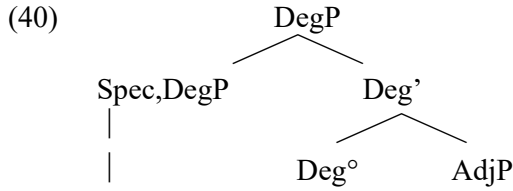
### 3.1 Dobrovie-Sorin's (2023) analysis of French: a morphologically complex SUP marker

- D-S agrees with Loccioni that the THE preceding ER in French postnominal superlatives is DegP-internal, i.e. it is part of the functional layers of the Adj, rather than a D° taking NP as a complement
- D-S rejects Loccioni's hypothesis that this DegP-internal THE has the semantics of a Max operator applying to a set of degrees.



- Given that the **postnominal (as well as adverbial and predicative) [THE ER]** in French has the **unconstrained** distribution of EST D-S proposes that

(i) **[THE ER] sits in the same position as EST**



- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| a. ER [ppP DP]      | comparative                                   |
| b' [EST ER T]       | dedicated superlative morpheme                |
| <b>b'' [THE ER]</b> | <b>dedicated superlative complex morpheme</b> |

(41) **[THE ER] is, like EST itself, the result of grammaticalization.**

- Possible sources of the grammaticalization
  - The contiguity between prenominal superlatively interpreted comparatives and THE (all Romance, see (42)).
  - Double definites (plausible for Romanian, see (43))

- (42) a. la plus belle fille  
 b. la più bella ragazza  
 c. cea mai frumoasă fată

- (43) a. fata (cea) blondă  
 girl-the (THE) blond  
 'the blond girl'  
 b. fata cea mai blondă  
 girl-the THE more blond  
 'the blondest girl'

- Modern French does not have double definites

(ii) **[THE ER] has the denotation of EST**

(44)  $[[\text{THE ER}]] = [[\text{EST}]] = \lambda A \lambda N. \lambda x. N(x) \wedge \exists d[A(d)(x) \wedge \forall y [N(y) \wedge y \neq x \rightarrow \neg A(d)(y)]]$

(45) !!No meaning **relation between** the THE inside [THE ER] and the **def. article** [D°THE].

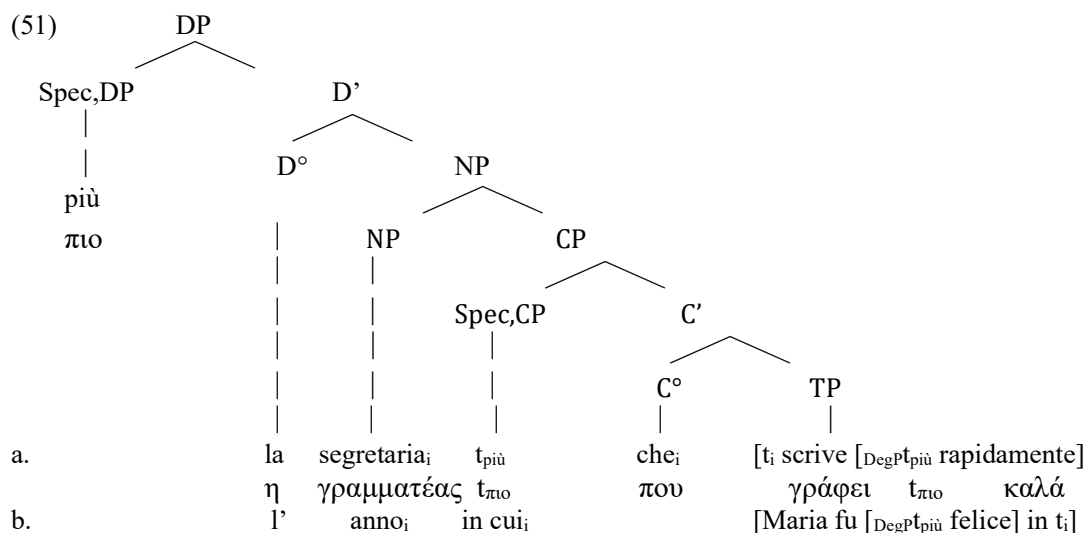
(45) goes against Loccioni's view stated in (29), repeated here:

(29) The DegP-internal THE functions as a max operator over degrees, i.e., it picks up the unique maximal degree.



### 3.3.2 Adjectival superlative comparatives in predicate positions and adverbial superlative comparatives

The analysis of (5)b, (6), (15)a is like that of adnominal superlative-interpreted comparatives in that ER raises to Spec,DP. But in this case the Spec,DP position is higher up and in order to reach it ER must move out of the relative clause:



The semantic composition relies on the following denotation of ER:

$$(52) \llbracket_{\text{Spec,DP}} \text{ER} \rrbracket = \lambda R \lambda x. \exists d [R(d)(x) \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' R(d')(y) \wedge y \neq x] \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y)]]$$

- **Crucial difference with adnominal superlatives: The relative clause is necessary** in order to have **non-adnominal relations** (adverbs or predicative adjectives) impose a condition on a variable bound by the iota. The relation expressed by the adnominal adjective is replaced by the relation expressed by the lambda-abstract over the wh-trace (notated R in **Error! Reference source not found.**).

- Compare **dedicated superlatives (-EST in English, Germanic, Slavic etc. and [THE ER] in French)**. **EST** (or **[THE ER]**) has an **entity-denoting argument built into its semantics**. This means that dedicated superlatives look for an argument (the so-called 'pivot') and say that the entity denoted by that argument satisfies the degree relation obtained by abstracting over the syntactic position of the pivot to a degree higher than any other entity that satisfies that same relation:

- (53) a. **Maria** writes **best**.  
 b. Maria écrit [**le mieux**].

- **Bare comparatives do not have such a 'pivot' argument built into their semantics, hence the impossibility of the superlative reading of (11) in Greek (and Italian)**. It is only if bare comparatives are embedded inside a definite DP, as in (13), that the property they denote may combine with the Iota and impose a condition on the entity denoted by the definite DP.

#### 4. Summary

**(54) We have shown that:**

- a. Greek patterns with It. and contrasts with French regarding the **syntax of superlatives**
- b. French has a superlative-dedicated morphologically complex constituent [THE ER]
- c. **Greek (like Italian) has a bare ER that can be interpreted as superlative due to a dependency relation with the THE of the embedding DP.**
- d. **For non-adnominal superlative-interpreted ER the relation between THE and ER needs to be mediated by a wh-phrase.**

**(55) Theoretical contribution:**

- a. deriving the superlative meaning by raising ER to Spec,DP at LF
- b. distinguishing between **superlative meanings obtained via silent ‘than all (others)’** (in contexts that allow it) and **comparative meanings obtained via silent ‘than x’**

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