



Comparatives, Superlatives and Definiteness in Romance*

Carmen Dobrovie-Sorin

CNRS-LLF, Université Paris Cité

The “Iorgu Jordan – Alexandru Rosetti” Institute of
Linguistics, Romanian Academy, Bucharest

(<sorin.carmen2@gmail.com>)

Citation: C. Dobrovie-Sorin (2023)
Comparatives, Superlatives and
Definiteness in Romance. *Qulso*
9: pp. 97-116. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/QULSO-2421-7220-15157>

Copyright: © 2023 C. Dobrovie-Sorin. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by FirenzeUniversity Press (<https://oaj.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-qulso/index>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited

Data Availability Statement:
All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract:

Romance languages do not have superlative-dedicated morphemes (see *most/-est* in English) but instead express superlative meanings by using a comparative combined with a definite article. There are, however, interesting crosslinguistic differences that indicate that the role of “definiteness” for the superlative meaning of comparatives is different across Romance languages. Thus, French superlative adverbs and superlative postnominal adjectives are necessarily formed with (what looks like) a definite article (THE notates items that are morphologically identical to the definite article across languages) preceding the comparative morpheme *plus* (ER notates the comparative morpheme across languages, regardless of whether it is an affix or a free standing morpheme), whereas in the Italian corresponding examples THE is banned. According to Loccioni (2018) this crosslinguistic difference is not structural: in order to get superlative meanings Italian comparatives would be formed with a covert D(e-terminer) corresponding to THE in French. I will propose instead that whereas French has a superlative-dedicated phrase of the form [THE ER], Italian has a “bare”, i.e., a THE-less ER that moreover lacks a *than*-argument, which gets a superlative meaning via raising to the Spec of [_v,THE].

Keywords: *Comparative, Definite, Grammaticalization, Superlative*

* Thanks go to Ion Giurgea, Patricia Cabredo-Hofherr, Anisia Popescu and two QULSO reviewers for comments on previous versions of this paper. A previous version of this work can be found in Cabredo Hofherr, Patricia, Herby Glaude, and Elena Soare (eds). 2023. *La grammaire est une fête / Grammar is a moveable feast. Mélanges pour / A Webschrift for Anne Zribi-Hertz*. This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitization, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-0042, within PNCDI III and by LABEX-EFL.

1. *Definiteness and superlatives across languages*

This paper examines the differences between French and Italian regarding the make-up of superlatives. The first obvious contrast, which cannot go unnoticed by anybody who speaks both languages even at a superficial level concerns postnominal superlatives:

- (1) a. la ragazza (*la) più povera
 the girl (*the) more poor
 ‘the poorest girl’
 b. la fille *(la) plus pauvre
 the girl *(the) more poor
 ‘the poorest girl’

The other two sets of contrasting French-Italian data concern superlative adverbs and superlative adjectives in predicate positions. These data are more subtle and subject to speaker-to-speaker variation, and as such they cannot be introduced in this introductory section. But importantly, when the data is carefully established, the three sets show a perfect parallelism: compulsory presence vs. absence of a THE immediately preceding the comparative form of the adjective/adverb (see § 2.1); in French DPs with postnominal superlatives this THE co-occurs with [_{DP} THE], as in (1a).

Looking beyond French and Italian, all Romance languages to the exception of Romanian are like Italian: the comparative lacks an immediately preceding THE and gets a superlative reading when embedded inside a definite DP. Note moreover that the Italian pattern is found in many (groups of) languages beyond Romance languages: thus, in Greek, Arabic, Celtic or Albanian, superlative meanings are conveyed by embedding comparatives inside definite DPs. This pattern is crosslinguistically so widespread that it seems natural to assume that the *superlative readings of definite-DP-embedded comparatives can be obtained without the mediation of a superlative-dedicated marker* (compare Loccioni 2018, who postulates a covert instantiation of THE in Italian).

In contrast to the large number of languages that are similar to Italian, only very few languages exhibit the French pattern. As a matter of fact, Romanian is the only other documented language (Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2006; Giurgea 2013: 164-165; Cornilescu and Giurgea 2013: 471-474; Dobrovie-Sorin 2021) that is like French in having a superlative marker (a strong form of the definite article CEL_{m.sg}/CEA_{f.sg}/CEI_{m.pl}/CELE_{f.pl} immediately precedes the comparative adjective).¹ The scarcity of this pattern points to grammaticalization.

Unless otherwise specified, I will examine only THE-marked superlatives in French and their unmarked counterparts in Italian. This concerns postnominal, adverbial and predicative superlatives/comparatives with superlative meanings. Prenominal superlatives are outside the main scope of the paper and will be brought up only briefly when they become relevant (see §4.1).

2. *French vs. Italian*

2.1 *Postnominal, adverbial and predicate superlatives (based on Loccioni 2018)*

The contrast between Italian and French shown in (1a-b) above for postnominal adjectives is replicated by the contrast below, which concerns adverbs:

¹ According to Bobaljik (2012), Ubykh, an extinct North-Western Caucasian language, has a superlative marker, a prefix attached to the comparative, that comes from the definite article.

- (2) a. la segretaria che scrive (*il) più rapidamente
the secretary who writes (*the) more quickly
'the secretary who writes the most quickly.'
b. la secrétaire qui écrit *(le) plus vite
the secretary who writes *(the) more quickly
'the secretary who writes the most quickly.'

Note now that the superlative reading of adverbs arises in Italian only when the comparative is embedded inside a relative clause headed by a definite DP (see (2a)). When this condition is not satisfied, only the comparative reading is possible:

- (3) Maria scrive più rapidamente
'Maria writes more quickly/*most quickly.'

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

- (4) Marie écrit plus vite /**le** plus vite
'Maria writes more quickly/most quickly.'

Turning now to predicate positions, the use of a definite article preceding a comparative form triggers a superlative reading in examples of the following type:

- (5) Maria fu la più veloce
Maria was the more quick
'Maria was the quickest.'

As observed by Loccioni (2018), the presence of the definite article signals a DP projection headed by a null N. Correlatively, the copular sentence is some kind of equative. Under this analysis, the superlative meaning is explained by the general rule for adnominal positions: a comparative embedded inside a definite DP is interpreted as superlative.

More interesting are examples of the type in (6a), which illustrates the *relative*² superlative reading of comparative adjectives in predicate positions:

- (6) a. l'anno in cui Maria fu più felice
'the year in which Mary was happiest.'
b. Maria fu più felice **nel 2012**
'Maria was happier/*happiest **in 2012** (than in any other year).'

In this case the definite article is banned and the superlative reading is made possible by embedding the predicative comparative inside a relative headed by a definite DP, as in (6a).³

² When applied to predicate positions, the term 'relative' superlative seems out of place. It is used here to indicate a reading for which the *comparandum* is an element other than the subject of the predication (see *Maria* in (5a), e.g., some particular year for the example in (5a)).

³ Giurgea (2022) observes that Loccioni's condition might be too strong: embedding inside a cleft or a question would be sufficient to license the superlative meaning of comparatives in Italian. This type of data is subject to

The example in (6b) shows that in the absence of embedding the relative superlative reading is impossible even if the *comparandum* is focused (as indicated by the bolding).

The contrast between (5) and (6a) argues against Matushansky's (2008) view that all superlatives would be attributive, i.e., they would necessarily modify an overt or a covert N. What Italian shows is that the interpretation is different depending on the presence/absence of the definite article: in the former case it is the subject of the copular sentence that is said to have the highest degree, whereas in the latter case the highest degree is predicated of some other argument or adjunct present inside the predicate of the copular sentence. The systematic absence of the definite article with Italian adverbial superlatives (see (2a)) constitutes further evidence against Matushansky's generalization,⁴ which must therefore be weakened. The weakest form is certainly true: a syntactic configuration with a null N *may* underly predicate superlatives that attribute the highest degree to the subject of a copular sentence. I leave it as an open question whether a null N (and correlatively a definite article in languages with articles) is *necessary* in the same context.

2.2 Loccioni's (2018) analysis

According to Loccioni (2018: 74) French and Italian superlatives are structurally identical, the difference pertaining only to PF (Phonological Form). In both languages the superlative would be formed with a DegP-internal definite D(eterminer), which would be realized as $[_D \text{THE}]$ and $[_D \emptyset]$, respectively:

- | | | |
|-----|---|---------|
| (7) | $[_{AP}[_{DegP}[_D \text{THE}] \text{ER DEGREE}] \text{Adj}]$ | French |
| (8) | $[_{AP}[_{DegP}[_D \emptyset] \text{ER DEGREE}] \text{Adj}]$ | Italian |

Loccioni's representation in (7) is meant to convey the intuition that French superlative adjectives mean something like 'Adj (e.g., *nice*) to the unique degree that is higher than all other degrees (on the scale of *nice*)'. This means that in (7) DEGREE notates a set of degrees and the DegP-internal $[_D \text{THE}]$ has the semantics of a maximality operator:

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

The necessity of embedding $[_{AP}[_{DegP}[_D \emptyset] \text{ER DEGREE}] \text{Adj}]$ inside a definite DP would be due to the phonological shape of the DegP-internal D: because it is null, $[_D \emptyset]$ needs to be C-commanded by $[_D \text{THE}]$. The unconstrained distribution (no need of definite DP-embedding for superlative adverbs or for relative superlative adjectives in predicate positions) of French superlatives would be due to that fact that $[_D \text{THE}]$ is overt.

Loccioni's proposal is confronted with a number of problems. The first one concerns the relation with Krasikova's (2012) proposal, which Loccioni invokes as being 'similar in spirit' to her own analysis. Krasikova's concern was the presence of $[_D \text{THE}]$ in English DPs with 'relative' superlative readings, which conflicts with their semantic 'indefiniteness' (Szabolcsi 1986):

variation among speakers, which suggests that the mechanism on which it relies might be of a different type than the one underlying the 'core' cases, which are characterized by embedding inside a definite DP.

⁴ Matushansky explicitly leaves aside adverbial superlatives, but nevertheless discusses *nai*-forms in Russian (see her section 10.2). Although English is not my focus in this article, let me observe that *the* is optional (rather than obligatory) with superlative adverbs.

- (10) 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 of a context-given set of people

Krasikova's solution of the conflict exhibited by relative superlatives between morphosyntactic definiteness and semantic indefiniteness is to assume that at LF the [THE] of *the highest mountain* is not interpreted in D° but instead belongs to the DegP projection of the adjective, where it is interpreted as a maximality operator over degrees. The morphosyntactic make-up of French superlatives looks like a confirmation of Krasikova's hypothesis: indeed, it seems uncontroversial that the THE immediately preceding the comparative form of the adjective does not sit in D°⁵, but instead is internal to the DegP. And given the morphological identity that this DegP-internal THE shows with [_D THE] it is tempting to assume that both of the two THE's are maximality operators that differ in the nature of the set they apply to: individuals vs degrees. Note however that whereas Krasikova's hypothesis was only meant for relative superlatives, Loccioni proposes a similar analysis for both absolute and relative readings of French superlatives without explaining why languages would differ along those lines. In the absence of such an explanation, Loccioni's and Krasikova's analyses should be evaluated independently, in the sense that the (in)adequacy of one of them does not bear on the other. In what follows I will therefore concentrate on Loccioni's proposal, bringing up one empirical and two conceptual problems.

The empirical problem (pointed out to me by an anonymous reviewer of *Going Romance 2022*) is related to the following examples:

- (11) a. Gli amici più poveri
 'the poorest friends.'
 b. Gli amici di persone più povere
 'the friends of people more poor/*poorest.'

It is crucial to observe that in both (11a) and (11b) ER is C-commanded by THE. That C-command holds in (11b) 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 (11b):

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

The problem is that (11b) lacks the superlative meaning despite the fact that the comparative is C-commanded by [_D gli]. The difference between (11a) and (11b) cannot be captured by Loccioni's analysis.

A further problem is related to the crosslinguistic rarity of the French pattern (Romanian being the only other instantiation so far documented), which is not expected given Loccioni's analysis. Indeed, if the THE immediately preceding the comparative were a meaningful maximality operator we would expect the French type of superlative make-up to be crosslinguistically widespread, which is the reverse of what we observe.

⁵ See Loccioni's (2018) arguments against Kayne (2008), who analyzed the second THE as the D of the whole DP.

In what follows I will first review previous analyses of superlative-dedicated morphemes, and then I will try to integrate the Romance data into a coherent crosslinguistic landscape of superlatives.

3. Superlative-dedicated morphemes

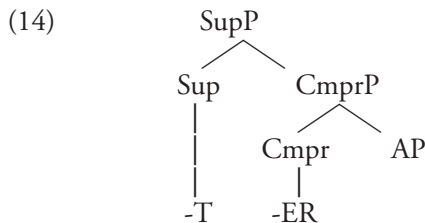
In this section I will first briefly present the decompositional analysis of superlative-dedicated morphemes originating in Bobaljik (2012) and further investigated by Dunbar and Wellwood (2016).⁶ I will then comment on the semantic composition corresponding to the morphological decomposition.

3.1 Decomposing superlative-dedicated morphemes (EST)

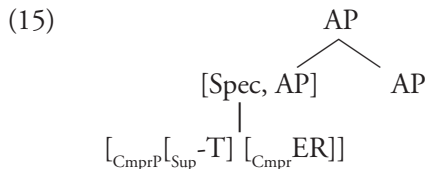
Based on an analysis of the suppletive forms of superlatives in a large number of languages, Bobaljik (2012) proposed that:

- (13) The superlative contains the comparative operator, both morphologically and semantically.

The generalization in (13) is compatible with a number of different hierarchical configurations. One possible structure, assumed by Bobaljik himself, involves two ‘nesting’ functional heads, Cmpr and Sup:

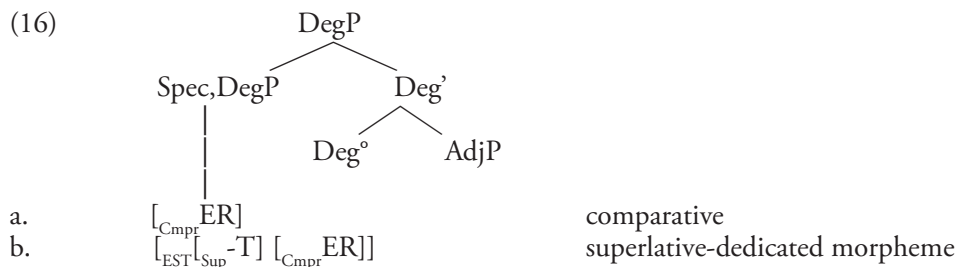


Dunbar and Wellwood (2016: 12-13) argue against Bobaljik’s structure and in favor of a configuration in which Cmpr and Sup form a constituent sitting in Spec,AP. EST (made up of [_{Sup} -T] and [_{Cmpr} ER]) is labelled CmprP because [_{Cmpr} ER] and EST are in complementary distribution (both occupy Spec,AP) and [_{Cmpr} ER] can appear without [_{Sup} -T]:



My own notational variant of Dunbar and Wellwood’s analysis is shown in (16), which is more in line with the view that gradable adjectives belong to the functional projection headed by Deg°. I have also replaced the labels Sup1 and Sup2 used by these authors with EST and Sup, where EST is the currently used label for the superlative-dedicated morpheme and Sup is the part of EST realized as [-T]:

⁶ See also Szabolcsi (2012) and Al-Bitar (2019), a.o.



3.2 The semantics of superlative-dedicated morphemes

Given the morphological decomposition described above, we may wonder whether the denotation of the superlative morpheme (EST) can be derived from the denotation of the comparative (ER).

Let me directly introduce the denotation of EST:

$$(17) \quad \llbracket \text{EST} \rrbracket = \lambda R. \lambda x. \exists d [R(d)(x) \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' R(d')(y) \wedge y \neq x] \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y)]]$$

(17) is Heim's (1999) comparison-class-free denotation (her (6)) of EST.⁷ According to (17) EST applies to a relation $R_{\langle d, \text{et} \rangle}$, e.g., $\llbracket d \cdot \lambda x. d\text{-poor}(x) \wedge \text{girl}(x) \rrbracket$, and results in e.g., *poorest girl*, which denotes the singleton set of individuals x such that the degree d to which the girl x is poor is not attained by any other girl. The restriction to a sub-set of the girls in the whole world is a particular case of the contextual restrictions on quantificational domains (von Stechow 1994; Schwarz 2009), and as such need not be specified as an argument (the comparison-class argument that Heim uses in the other denotations that she envisages for EST) of superlatives *per se*.

Importantly, the denotation of EST given in (17) is independent of $[\text{D}, \text{THE}]$, which denotes the Iota operator and applies at the next stage of the derivation, turning the singleton set into the individual denoted by *the poorest girl*.

Precisely because it is independent of $[\text{D}, \text{THE}]$, the denotation of EST given in (17) is in principle also fit for adverbial and predicative superlatives:⁸

- (18) a. Marie writes fastest.
b. Marie was best yesterday.

⁷ See also von Stechow (1994), Matushansky (2008), Gajewski (2010) and Krasikova (2012) for analyses that dispense with comparison classes for the absolute readings of superlatives. For relative superlatives, Bumford (2017) proposed a comparison-class-free denotation. The proposal of replacing comparison classes in the analysis of relative superlatives with the situation arguments used for contextual restrictions of quantifiers in general was made by Giurgea (2022) and Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2023).

⁸ It should however be noted that Heim herself does not use this formula for relative superlatives (in either adnominal or predicative positions) and she does not examine superlative adverbs. For relative superlatives Heim proposes denotations that make use of comparison classes and association of focus. However, the LF-raising analysis adopted by Heim constitutes a suitable input for analyzing the relative readings as well as the adverbial superlatives on the basis of the denotation of EST given in (16). For the details of the analysis the reader is referred to Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2023).

According to Heim's (1999) 'scopal analysis', the semantic composition of examples of the type in (18a-b) rely on LFs of the type in (19a-b), obtained by raising both the *comparandum* (sometimes called 'correlate' or 'pivot') and EST, which targets the position just below the raised comparandum:

- (19) a. Marie EST [t_{Marie} [$_{\text{VP}}$ writes t_{EST} fast]
 b. yesterday EST [Marie was t_{EST} good $t_{\text{yesterday}}$]

In (19a-b) the relation R in (17) is obtained by abstracting over the d-argument of the adverb/predicative adjective and over the position from which the comparandum (*Marie/yesterday*) has raised. By saturating (17) with *Marie* and *write d-fast*, we end up with (20a) as the truth-condition for (18a). Similarly, (20b) – corresponding to (18b) – is obtained by saturating (17) with *yesterday* and λt *Marie was d-good at t*:

- (20) a. $\exists d[\text{wr.-fast}(d)(\text{Marie}) \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' \text{wr.-fast}(d')(y) \wedge y \neq \text{Marie}] \rightarrow \neg \text{wr.-fast}(d)(y)]]$
 b. $\exists d[M \text{ was good}(d)(\text{yest}) \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' M \text{ was good}(d')(y) \wedge y \neq \text{yesterday}] \rightarrow \neg M \text{ was good}(d)(y)]]$

Let me stress again that in examples of the type in (18a-b) the superlative adverb/adjective is not DP-internal, and as such its semantics has nothing to do with the semantics of [$_{\text{D}}$ THE], not even at some later stage of the derivation (as is the case for adnominal superlative adjectives).

3.3 Deriving EST from ER

Let us now see whether the denotation of EST given in (17)⁹ can be compositionally related to the denotation of ER:

- (21) $\llbracket \text{ER} \rrbracket = \lambda y. \lambda R. \lambda x. \exists d[R(d)(x) \wedge \neg R(d)(y)]$

The crucial difference between $\llbracket \text{EST} \rrbracket$ and $\llbracket \text{ER} \rrbracket$ (see (17) and (21)) is that the former lacks the *than*-argument (y in (21)) but instead introduces universal quantification over all the individuals that satisfy R and are different from the external argument x .

Bobaljik (2012) does not provide a compositional semantics that would do justice to the morphological decomposition of EST into ER and T but makes a conceptual suggestion: superlative meanings are complex, they contain the meaning of the comparative, the additional bit (-T in the English -EST) intuitively corresponding to 'than all the others'. According to Dunbar and Wellwood (2016), the branching configuration in (15) but not Bobaljik's nesting structure in (14) allows a compositional derivation of the denotation of -EST from that of [ER]. [$_{\text{Sup}}$ -T] (notated SUP₂ in Dunbar and Wellwood) can be assumed to be a higher order function that takes a function of the same type as $\llbracket \text{ER} \rrbracket$ as an argument and returns a function of the same type as EST/SUP₁:

⁹ This denotation, which takes the *than*-argument to denote an entity, departs from the most frequently assumed definition, according to which ER denotes a relation between degree properties. The lower-level denotation given in the text enables an easier comparison between the denotation of ER adopted in the text and that of EST.

$$(22) \llbracket \text{EST} \rrbracket = \llbracket \text{Sup} \text{-T} \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{ER} \rrbracket)$$

The reader interested in the details of the semantic composition is referred to Dunbar and Wellwood's denotation of SUP_2 (corresponding to our $[\text{Sup} \text{-T}]$) in (26) and the semantic derivation in (28). I do not reproduce them here because the notations as well as the denotations of ER and EST differ from those adopted in the present paper. It is moreover not necessary to spend time and space with the semantic composition, which interests us here only insofar as it tells us what it needs as a syntactic input. Suffice it to say that the denotation that Dunbar and Wellwood propose for SUP_2 (our $[\text{Sup} \text{-T}]$) captures the intuitive meaning of superlatives as 'more than all others' because $\llbracket \text{SUP}_2 \rrbracket / \llbracket \text{Sup} \text{-T} \rrbracket$ feeds in universal quantification over alternatives to the *comparandum*.

In sum, what I take from Dunbar and Wellwood is the syntactic conclusion: the branching configuration in (15) constitutes a suitable input for a semantic composition that derives EST from ER by means of standard functional application.

It is however important to observe that the postulated denotation of $[\text{Sup} \text{-T}]$ *does not exist independently of its occurrence inside* EST, which signals grammaticalization. The fact that grammaticalization paths are language-specific explains why the diachronic origin of Sup (the prefix or suffix added to the comparative form) varies crosslinguistically and is not even semantically related to the universal quantification over alternatives contributed by EST;¹⁰ it is only in Latvian that the superlative prefix is related to the root that means 'all'.

In sum, the semantics of superlative-dedicated forms such as EST, which can be defined by using a comparative and universal quantification, is arguably universal, on a par with the comparative operator ER. For those languages in which EST is decomposable into ER and Sup,¹¹ the denotation of Sup (which is also universal, being obtained by 'reverse' functional application from EST and ER) can informally be taken to contribute '(than) all the others', a meaning that is not related to the meanings of the crosslinguistically diverse diachronic sources of Sup.

4. Back to Romance

Let us now go back to the contrasts between French and Italian introduced in section 2:¹² (i) in French postnominal, adverbial and predicative superlatives the comparative (ER) is immediately preceded by [THE] and the latter cannot be (easily) analyzed as sitting in D'; postnominal superlatives end up co-occurring with two THE's: the one immediately preceding the comparative and $[\text{D}' \text{THE}]$, e.g., *la fille la plus pauvre* 'the girl the more poor', "the poorest girl"; (ii) in Italian postnominal, adverbial and predicative superlatives the comparative (ER) cannot be immediately preceded by THE, but must appear inside a DP headed by $[\text{D}' \text{THE}]$. In what follows I will examine in turn the French and Italian superlatives against the background of our knowledge of superlative-dedicated morphemes.

¹⁰ Bobaljik (2012: 76-77) gives the following list of different origins of superlative prefixes or suffixes: "[...] in Latvian, the prefix is the root meaning 'all'; in Czech, it is etymologically a preposition and pronoun (roughly: 'on it'); in Hungarian an intensifier of sorts; in Chukchi an emphatic pronoun (roughly 'self', Russian *sam*; Skorik 1977: 334); and in Ubykh, the prefix is the definite article. The generally accepted origin for the PIE [Proto Indo European] suffix *-to is also something like a marker of definiteness or individuation (see Cowgill 1970 for extensive discussion)".

¹¹ Note that there are languages, e.g., Slavic, or Turkish, where comparatives and superlatives are built with two unrelated markers. Even for such languages the denotation of the superlative morpheme is arguably the same as that of EST in English, although there is no direct evidence in favor of a morphological decomposition into ER and Sup. *Prima facie*, at least, this indicates that Bobaljik's (2012) claim that EST is always built on top of ER should be weakened.

¹² The reader should bear in mind that these generalizations do not concern prenominal superlatives (see §4.1).

4.1 French: A superlative-dedicated phrase

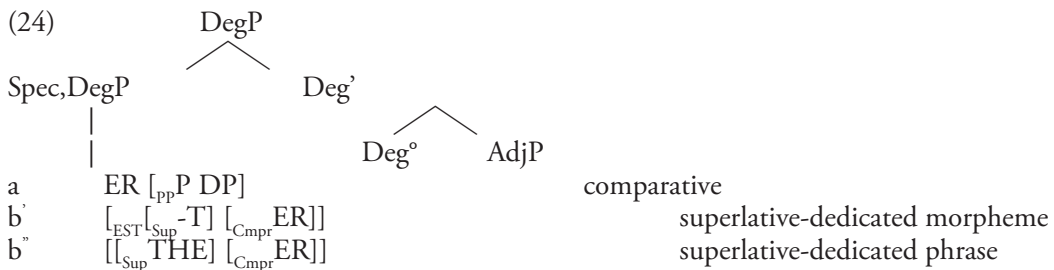
In this section we will examine those French configurations in which THE immediately precedes the comparative:

- (23)
- | | | | | |
|----|---|-----------|-------------|--|
| a. | la fille *(la) plus pauvre | | | |
| | the girl the more poor | | | |
| | ‘the poorest girl.’ | | | |
| b. | Marie écrit plus vite / le plus vite | | | |
| | Marie writes more quickly/the more quickly | | | |
| | ‘Marie writes more quickly/the most quickly.’ | | | |
| c. | Marie a été la plus heureuse | en | 1968 | |
| | Marie has been the more happy | in | 1968 | |
| | ‘Marie was the happiest in 1968.’ | | | |

Quite clearly the THE that immediately precedes *plus pauvre*, *plus vite* and *plus heureuse* in the examples above does not sit in D° (but see Kayne 2008), which is either altogether absent (see the b-c examples, built with adverbial and predicate adjectives) or filled with another instantiation of THE (see the a example, in which the superlative adjective is postnominal).

Following Loccioni (2018) I will assume that this THE is part of the functional layers of the Adj. I have however argued (see § 2.2 above) against Loccioni’s hypothesis that this DegP-internal THE has the semantics of a Max operator.

My core proposal will be that [THE ER] is a superlative-dedicated phrase that sits in Spec,DegP, on a par with EST (the superlative-dedicated morpheme) and ER (the comparative morpheme):



According to this proposal, the THE that immediately precedes comparatives in French is an exponent of Sup that goes back to a definite article, but which entertains no synchronic relation to the definite article.¹³ This means that the denotation of the DegP-internal THE of French is *not* related to the denotation of the definite article THE (*contra* Loccioni 2018, according to whom

¹³ As observed by a reviewer, this analysis does not explain why [_{Sup} THE] exhibits number and gender agreement with the head N, on a par with definite articles and contrary to degree modifiers such as *plus* or the Italian unagreeing modal superlatives. I leave this issue for further investigation. But let me just observe that the syntax-semantics of modal superlatives is crosslinguistically crucially different from that of run-of-the-mill superlatives and as such deserve a separate investigation. Clear evidence in favor of the need to keep modal superlatives separate from other superlatives is the fact that modal superlative can be embedded inside indefinite DPs, e.g., *Cerco una ragazza il più gentile possibile* ‘I am looking for a girl the more kind possible’, ‘I am looking for a girl as kind as possible’.

the superlative marker THE is a Deg-P internal D° that functions as a maximality operator). Under my own proposal, [_{Sup} THE] is a superlative marker that is merely homophonous to [_D THE].

The use of THE as a superlative marker is probably due to the grammaticalization of a syntactic configuration in which THE was used as a definite article. Double definiteness constitutes a plausible diachronic input for a restructuring/grammaticalization process that led to the formation of Romanian superlative-dedicated constituents (which behave by and large on a par with French superlatives). Indeed, double definiteness is very productive in Romanian regardless of whether postnominal modifiers are superlatives or not:

- (25) a. fata (cea) blondă
 girl-the (THE) blond
 ‘the blond girl.’
 b. fata cea mai blondă
 girl-the THE more blond
 ‘the blondest girl.’

French does not, however, exhibit double definiteness.

More plausible is the contiguity between prenominal comparatives (necessarily interpreted as superlatives) and THE:

- (26) la plus jolie fille
 the more pretty girl
 ‘the prettiest girl.’

Note that the DP-initial THE can be shown *not to be part* of Spec, DegP but instead sits in D° (Loccioni 2018), the prenominal comparative occupying a dedicated Sup position inaccessible to positive or comparatively interpreted adjectives (Kayne 2008; Cinque 2010). The relevant examples involve DPs that contain numerals in addition to superlatives:¹⁴

- (27) a. les deux plus jolies filles
 the two more pretty girls
 ‘the two prettiest girls.’
 b. le deuxième plus riche pays
 the second more rich country
 ‘the second richest country.’
 c. *les plus jolies deux filles
 the more pretty two girls
 d. *le plus riche deuxième pays

¹⁴ Romanian differs from Italian and French in that the THE (realized as *ce/ea*, a strong form of definite article, which inflects for gender and number) that precedes prenominal comparatives can never be separated from the comparative, not even by numerals. Examples of this type indicate that in Romanian, a THE preceding the comparative is never in D° but instead the phrase [THE ER] sits in Spec, DP (Giurcea 2013, 2022):

(i) *cele două mai frumoase fete
 the two more beautiful girls
 (ii) cele mai frumoase două fete
 the more beautiful two girls

The fact that in DPs with numerals THE does not belong to DegP does not mean that this is also the case in DPs *without* numerals, e.g., *les plus belles filles*. In these DPs, the structure in (28a) may have gradually been reanalyzed into that in (28b), where THE is part of the DegP:

- (28) a. $[_{D'} \text{les}] [_{XP} [_{\text{DegP}} \text{plus belles}] [_{\text{NP}} \text{filles}]]$
 b. $[_{\text{Spec,DP}} [_{\text{DegP}} \text{les plus belles}] [_{D'} [_{D'} \emptyset] [_{\text{NP}} \text{filles}]]]$

But now, the problem is that the contiguity between $[_{D'} \text{THE}]$ and ER shown in (26) for French also holds in Italian (e.g., *la più bella ragazza* ‘the more beautiful girl’ meaning ‘the most beautiful girl’, which arguably has the structure shown in (28a). The question arises as to why this configuration has grammaticalized in French but not in Italian. Differences in the properties of the definite articles in the two languages might be involved.¹⁵

4.2 The semantics of [THE ER] in French

The morphosyntactic analysis proposed in (24) for French superlatives allows us to extend Dunbar and Wellwood’s compositional analysis of $[_{\text{EST}} [_{\text{Sup}} -\text{T}] [_{\text{Cmpr}} \text{ER}]]$ to cover $[[[_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}}] [_{\text{Cmpr}} \text{ER}]]$ in French. Thus, the Spec,DegP-internal $[_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}]$ is an exponent of a functional category Sup that could be listed in the Lexicon with the denotation proposed by Dunbar and Wellwood for $\text{SUP}_2 / [_{\text{Sup}} -\text{T}]$ (see their formula in (26)). The phrase $[_{\text{Spec,DegP}} [_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}}] [_{\text{Cmpr}} \text{ER}]]$ would be built in the syntax, and correspondingly its denotation would be obtained by applying $[_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}]$ to $[_{\text{Cmpr}} \text{ER}]$, as stated in (29), which is parallel with (30), which is Dunbar and Wellwood’s proposal for the semantic composition of the English EST (see (22) above, and the discussion there):

$$(29) \llbracket [_{\text{Spec,DegP}} [_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}}] [_{\text{Cmpr}} \text{ER}]] \rrbracket = \llbracket [_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}}] \rrbracket (\llbracket [_{\text{Cmpr}} \text{ER}]] \rrbracket)$$

$$(30) \llbracket \text{EST} \rrbracket = \llbracket [_{\text{Sup}} -\text{T}] \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{ER} \rrbracket)$$

Granting that the denotation of $[_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}]$ is the same as that of $[_{\text{Sup}} -\text{T}]$, the denotation of $[_{\text{Spec,DegP}} [_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}}] [_{\text{Cmpr}} \text{ER}]]$ is the same as that of EST (see (17) above and (31) below):

$$(31) \llbracket [_{\text{Spec,DegP}} \text{THE ER}]] \rrbracket = \llbracket [_{\text{Spec,DegP}} \text{EST}] \rrbracket = \lambda R. \lambda x. \exists d [R(d)(x) \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' R(d')(y) \wedge y \neq x] \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y)]]$$

Just like $\llbracket [_{\text{Spec,DegP}} \text{EST}] \rrbracket$ itself, $\llbracket [_{\text{Spec,DegP}} \text{THE ER}]] \rrbracket$ can combine not only with adnominal adjectives, but also with adverbs and predicate adjectives. The semantic composition will be exactly the same as that presented in § 3.2 for $\llbracket [_{\text{Spec,DegP}} \text{EST}] \rrbracket$.

This semantic analysis, according to which $[_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}]$ does not share any piece of meaning with $[_{D'} \text{THE}]$ (in other words $[_{\text{Sup}} \text{THE}]$ and $[_{D'} \text{THE}]$ are homophones), is radically different from Loccioni’s proposal, according to which the DegP-internal THE is a D with the seman-

¹⁵ A reviewer claims that the Italian counterparts of the French (27a-b) are disallowed, e.g. *le due (*più carine) ragazze (più carine)/il dodicesimo (*più ricco) paese (più ricco)*. Note however that examples of this type can be found on the internet as well as in Loccioni (2018), which indicates that this impossibility is a matter of variation inside Italian, for which a fine-grained empirical investigation is necessary. Be this as it may, examples of this type do not directly bear on my main claims.

tics of a maximality operator, on a par with $[_D, \text{THE}]$, but differing from the latter regarding the domain of quantification: set of degrees vs. set of individuals. Postulating homophony is certainly ‘non explanatory’, and therefore we may be tempted to side with Loccioni against the present proposal. But the advantage disappears (at least to my understanding) as soon as we recall that French is an isolated case (Romanian being the only other instantiation I know of) whereas a great number of languages express superlatives by using THE-lacking comparatives (Italian is a particular instantiation of this pattern, to which I turn in the next subsection). Indeed, the hypothesis that DegP-internal THE denotes a maximality operator over degrees amounts to a fully compositional analysis, which incorrectly predicts that those languages that have both $[_D, \text{THE}]$ and ER will also have a superlative-dedicated phrase of the form $[\text{THE ER}]$.¹⁶ In sum, the crosslinguistic scarcity of the French pattern strongly supports the hypothesis of homophony adopted here.

4.3 Italian: ER in Spec,DP

The analysis of French proposed in the previous section goes against Loccioni’s structural analysis given in (7) and repeated in (32), in which the DegP-internal THE of French would be a maximality operator (see (9)), on a par with $[_D, \text{THE}]$:

(32) $[_{AP}[_{DegP}[_D \text{THE}] \text{ER DEGREE}] \text{Adj}]$ French

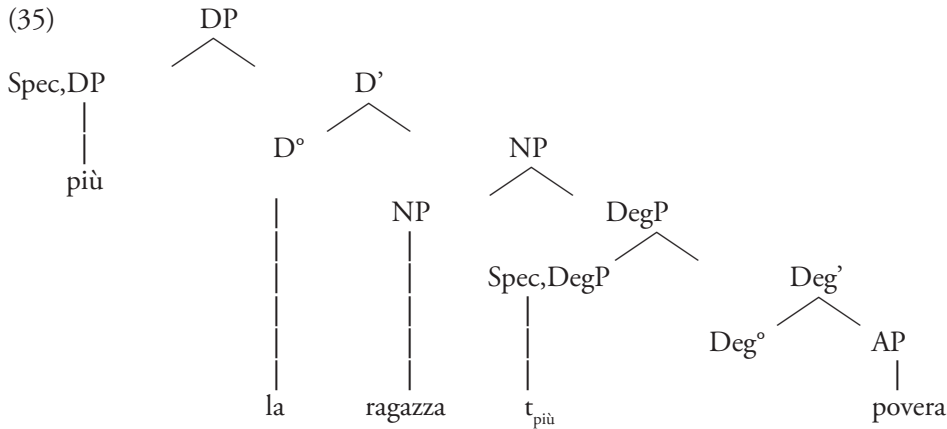
Given that I reject the adequacy of (32) for French it goes without saying that I also reject Loccioni’s proposal for Italian superlatives, which would be structurally identical to French superlatives, the only difference being the covert nature of the D element inside DegP:

(33) $[_{AP}[_{DegP}[_D \emptyset] \text{ER DEGREE}] \text{Adj}]$ Italian

My proposal will be that Italian ‘superlatives’ are in fact bare comparatives, i.e., they lack both $[_{Sup} \text{THE}]$ (superlative marker in French) and the *than*-argument of comparatives. Because it lacks the *than*-argument, ER is uninterpretable locally but it becomes interpretable by raising to Spec,DP, where it gets the denotation of a quantificational determiner:

(34) La ragazza più povera.

¹⁶ As observed by Loccioni (2018), Italian allows an invariable THE in the DegP of modal superlatives in predicate positions and in DPs headed by an indefinite article, e.g., *Ieri Maria è stata il più carina possibile, Cerco una ragazza il più gentile possibile*. Loccioni (2018) argues that in examples of this type (the invariable) THE denotes a maximality operator over degrees, which yields a unique degree value.



4.4 $[\text{Spec,DP ER}]$ as a Quantificational Determiner

My next proposal will be that the denotation of $[\text{Spec,DP ER}]$ is similar to that of superlatives in that it introduces comparison with all the entities different from the external argument:

$$(36) \quad \llbracket \text{Spec,DP ER} \rrbracket = \lambda R \lambda x. \exists d [R(d)(x) \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' R(d')(y) \wedge y \neq x] \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y)]]$$

(36) differs however from (31), the denotation of superlative-dedicated morphemes/phrases such as $[\text{Spec,DegP EST}]$ in English or $[\text{Spec,DegP THE ER}]$ in French, by the presence of an Iota instead of a lambda. This difference is crucial: it says that whereas a superlative-dedicated morpheme such as $[\text{Spec,DegP EST}]$ or $[\text{Spec,DegP THE ER}]$ can contribute *only* a descriptive condition that singles out one entity out of the set of entities that satisfy the same type of relation R (thus yielding a singleton set), a $[\text{Spec,DP ER}]$ (i.e., a [ER] that sits in Spec,DP) can introduce a superlative-like descriptive condition only because it *simultaneously* introduces the Iota operator. The introduction of the Iota operator could be attributed to the ‘Determiner’ type of interpretation that is arguably induced by sitting in the Spec,DP position.

Let me insist that under the analysis sketched here for Italian, there is no morphological piece corresponding to Sup (say $[\text{Sup -T}]$ in English or the DegP-internal $[\text{Sup THE}]$ of French). This means that the superlative descriptive condition cannot be assumed to be contributed by some piece of morphology, but is instead due to the Spec,D position that a *than*-less ER (realized as *più* in Italian) occupies at LF.

4.5 Vacuousness of THE

Given the denotation of $[\text{Spec,DP ER}]$ given in (36), $[\text{D THE}]$ itself is not interpreted. This analysis seems to illustrate Giusti’s (2002, 2015) theory according to which the definite article is semantically empty, having only formal syntactic features (that is case, number and gender) and those operators that function as determiners sit in Spec,DP. Note however that unlike Giusti we do not assume that the definite article is always semantically vacuous: indeed, we do not assume that the Spec,DP related to $[\text{D THE}]$ is always filled; and in those cases where it is not, $[\text{D THE}]$ has the denotation of an Iota operator.

We may still wonder why the D° associated to the configuration in (35) surfaces as a definite article. My answer is similar to the one given by Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2023) in their

analysis of the relative readings of superlatives: D^0 carries a definiteness feature as a result of Spec-Head agreement between $[_{\text{Spec,DP}} \text{ER}]$ and D^0 . The [def] feature on $[_{\text{Spec,DP}} \text{ER}]$ is justified by the fact that its denotation (see (36)) introduces uniqueness. Note that the denotation in (36) is meant only for the absolute reading. The reader is referred to Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2023) for the analysis of relative superlatives.¹⁷

The analysis proposed here captures the impossibility of superlative readings of ER in the It. examples in (3) (which contrast with their French counterparts in (4)): since in (3) there is no $[_D, \text{THE}]$ there is no Spec to which ER can raise, and the configuration is filtered out (a comparative reading is possible provided that a covert *than*-argument can be contextually retrieved). Under this proposal, the constraint of being embedded inside a definite DP is explained by the assumption that the superlative-like denotation of a bare ER depends on raising to Spec,DP at LF. The problem with which Loccioni (2018) is confronted (see examples (11) and the surrounding discussion) does not arise, because under the present proposal ER does not raise to some run-of-the-mill C-commanding $[_D, \text{THE}]$, but specifically to the $[_D, \text{THE}]$ that binds the variable singled out by the superlative description.

4.6 Adverbs and Predicates

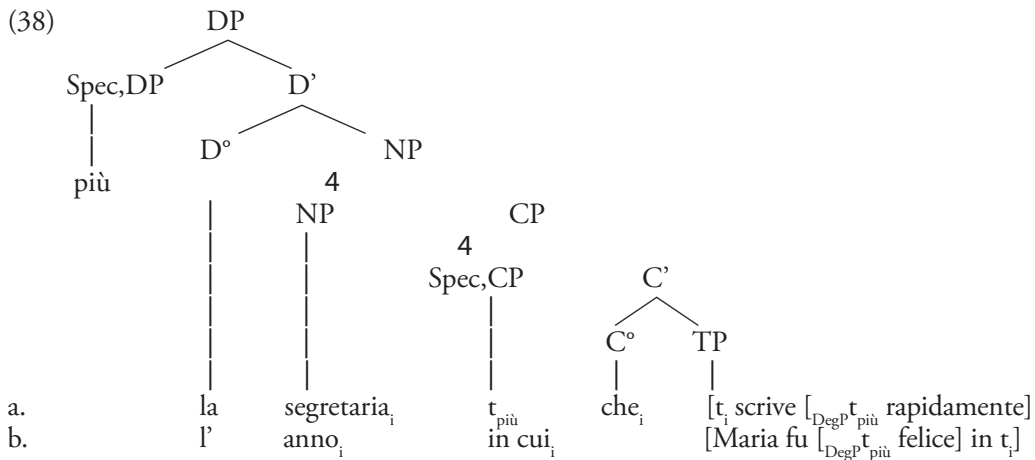
Let us now turn to adverbial and predicative positions. The examples in (2a) and (6a), repeated below in (37a-b), show that Italian comparatives in adverbial or predicative positions can be interpreted as superlative provided that they are embedded inside a relative clause headed by a definite:

- (37) a. la segretaria che scrive (*il) più rapidamente
 the secretary who writes (*the) more quickly
 ‘the secretary who writes the most quickly.’
 b. l’anno in cui Maria fu più felice.
 ‘the year in which Mary was happiest’

The definite article is excluded with adverbs (see (37a)) and allowed in predicate positions only for the ‘quasi-absolute’ reading (see (5) in § 2.1), which corresponds to a full DP built with a null N. The analysis of examples of that kind is the same as that of adnominal superlatively-interpreted comparatives in adnominal position (see §4.3-§4.5).

The analysis of (37a-b) 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:

¹⁷ Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea do not explicitly discuss the relative readings of Italian superlatives, but the analysis proposed there for the English EST extends to $[_{\text{Spec,DP}} \text{ER}]$. Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea do not analyze absolute superlatives but implicitly assume that EST is lower in languages which have dedicated superlative markers and correlatively, allow superlative adjectives to combine with other determiners such as the demonstrative and the indefinite article.



The semantic composition relies on the denotation of ER given in (36) and repeated below:

$$(39) \quad \llbracket \text{Spec,DP ER} \rrbracket = \lambda R \lambda \mathbf{x}. \exists d [R(d)(\mathbf{x}) \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' R(d')(y) \wedge y \neq \mathbf{x}] \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y)]]$$

In this case the R relation is obtained by abstracting over the wh-trace (which corresponds to the comparandum) and the d-trace left behind by the raising of ER from the DegP/AdjP-internal position to Spec,DP: $\lambda d. \lambda x. \text{secretary}(x) \ \& \ x \text{ writes } d\text{-quickly}$ and $\lambda d. \lambda x. \text{year}(x) \ \& \ \text{Maria was } d\text{-happy in } x$.

By filling these denotations into the R argument of (39a-b) we obtain the observed meanings: 'the unique secretary such that she writes quicker than any other secretary that writes to a certain speed' and 'the year in which Maria was happier than on any other year':

$$(40) \quad \text{a. } \llbracket \text{la segretaria che scrivo più rapidamente} \rrbracket = \mathbf{x}. \exists d [\text{secretary}(x) \ \& \ x \text{ writes } d\text{-quickly} \\ \wedge \forall y [[\exists d' y \text{ writes } d'\text{-quickly} \wedge \text{secretary}(y) \wedge y \neq x] \rightarrow \neg y \text{ writes } d\text{-quickly}]]$$

$$(41) \quad \text{b. } \llbracket \text{l'anno in cui Maria fu più felice} \rrbracket = \mathbf{x}. \exists d [\text{year}(x) \ \& \ \text{Maria was } d\text{-happy in } x \wedge \\ \forall y [[\exists d' \text{Maria was } d'\text{-happy in } y \wedge y \neq x] \rightarrow \neg \text{Maria was } d\text{-happy in } y]]$$

4.7 Extensions of the Analysis

In what follows I will briefly bring up three pieces of evidence in favor of the hypothesis of LF raising of $\llbracket \text{Spec, DegP ER} \rrbracket$ to Spec,DP. The first type of data, illustrated below for English and French, comes from languages that have superlative-dedicated morphemes or phrases:

- (42) a. the taller boy
 b. le garçon plus grand
 the boy more tall
 'the taller boy'

In examples of this type the comparative *taller/plus grand* lacks a *than*-argument and is interpreted as meaning ‘taller than the other’, which presupposes the existence of two boys in the discourse context. The point that is relevant in the present connection is that ‘than the other’ is supplied by default due to the lack of a *than*-complement provided that D° is filled with THE. Arguably, this meaning is difficult to obtain by first combining some silent instantiation of ‘than the other’ with (tall)ER, letting THE to be fed in at the last stage of the derivation. My suggestion is to assume that in the absence of a *than*-complement ER is uninterpretable in Spec,DegP and must raise to Spec,DP, where it gets the superlative-type of denotation in (36). The fact that in English and French [_{Spec,DP}ER] is interpreted as ‘than the other’ rather than ‘than all the others’ (as it does in Italian under our proposal) is arguably due to a blocking effect triggered by the fact that English and French have a superlative-dedicated morpheme/phrase [_{Spec,DegP}EST]/[_{Spec,DegP}THE ER]. Note also that for some English speakers examples of the type in (42) do not constrain the comparison set to just two elements (Szabolcsi 2012).

The second type of data is related to the relative readings of superlatives, which are reputedly difficult to analyze because their semantic indefiniteness (Szabolcsi 1986; Heim 1999) conflicts with the systematic presence of THE in D°. A possible solution to the problem is the hypothesis that in order to get a relative reading it is not just EST that raises (to a position just below the position to which the *comparandum* itself has raised, see Heim 1999), but rather the whole of the superlative DP; inside the superlative DP itself, EST raises to Spec,DP, where it is interpreted as a quantificational Determiner (see Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea in progress).

The third type of evidence concerns data already mentioned in footnote 10 in section 4.1, which show that in Romanian numerals intervene between prenominal superlatives and the noun itself:

- (43) a. *cele două mai frumoase fete
b. cele mai frumoase două fete

The relative order of the numeral and the superlative [cele mai frumoase] ‘the more good-looking’ meaning ‘the most good-looking’ strongly suggests that the latter sits in Spec,DP¹⁸ (Giurgea 2013).

Interestingly, the second and third type of data just invoked involve raising of EST rather than raising of a bare ER. This is not surprising, given that EST can be viewed as a particular value of the comparative (see Dunbar and Wellwood, where the projection of superlatives is labelled CmprP). The difference between EST and a bare ER is that the latter is forced to raise to Spec,DP in order to be interpreted, whereas EST (at least under the absolute reading) can be interpreted in some lower position (but nevertheless has to raise to a DP-internal scope position, see Heim 1999). This does not mean, however, that on its absolute reading EST *cannot* raise to the Spec of [_DTHE]. Issues regarding the complexity of linguistic computations might help choose between a (i) LF raising of EST to a position lower than Spec,DP + two-step semantic derivation (singleton set formation followed by application of the Iota) and (ii) LF raising of EST to Spec,DP + one-step semantic derivation based on the hypothesis that [_{Spec,DP}EST] (or [_{Spec,DP}THE ER] in French or Romanian) – on a par with the [_{Spec,DP}ER] of Italian – simultaneously contributes the superlative descriptive condition and the Iota operator.

¹⁸ This is not to say that the prenominal [cel mai Adj] necessarily raises to Spec,DP. In particular it does not when D° is filled with an indefinite article, which is a strongly constrained possibility (see Giurgea 2022).

5. Conclusions

I have shown that (i) French has a superlative-dedicated phrase [THE ER] that sits in the same syntactic position and has the same denotation as EST (Germanic or Slavic) and (ii) Italian has a bare ER that can be interpreted as superlative due to raising to the Spec of [_D, THE]. This proposal opens the way towards making sense of the observation that the Italian pattern is crosslinguistically widespread, in contrast to the French pattern. This generalization indicates that superlative meanings can be assigned ‘naturally’ or ‘by default’ to comparative forms (without the mediation of a superlative marker). My hypothesis is that the raising of a bare ER to the Spec of [_D, THE] is a default syntax-LF rule that applies crosslinguistically, turning ER into a ‘superlative determiner’ at LF. This rule is arguably blocked by EST in those languages that have EST. Superlative-dedicated phrases such as the French (and the Romanian) [THE ER] may arise via restructuring/grammaticalization, which depends on language-particular properties.

The crosslinguistic picture that emerges from the present proposal turns out to be quite different from the one presented by Bobaljik (2012: 77), who describes the Romance pattern of superlatives as involving ‘the addition of a definite article (or other definiteness marker) to the comparative (whether the comparative is itself formed morphologically or periphrastically)’. Bobaljik does not seem to be aware that French and Romanian syntactically differ from Italian and Ibero-Romance, although he does raise the question as to whether there is a real crosslinguistic difference (in his words, ‘meaningful line to be drawn’) between those languages that are described by grammarians as having superlatives built by combining comparatives with definiteness¹⁹ and those described as lacking a morphological distinction between comparatives and superlatives, the difference in interpretation being indicated by context and/or syntax.²⁰ After envisaging the possibility that languages without superlatives (in which the superlative meaning would depend on the syntax) may exist, Bobaljik sheds doubt on it by the following reasoning: ‘On the other hand, if the combination of a definite article plus the comparative were sufficient to derive a superlative meaning (with no null elements, or equivalent semantic devices such as type-shifting operations or other postulates), then this reading should be routinely available in other languages, such as English, where it is not (except in the superlative comparing two items: (*Of the two books*), *the shorter one is on the table*). I therefore leave this question open.’ The present article may be viewed as a step towards tackling this question. My answer to why the ‘more than all others’ reading does not arise in English is that English has a dedicated morpheme EST. Such morphemes exist in languages without definite articles (Slavic) and in languages with articles (Germanic) they may have appeared prior to the introduction of the definite article. Among the languages with definite articles on the other hand, the most widespread pattern is the one (discussed here for Italian) in which the superlative reading is obtained by embedding a comparative inside a definite DP. Only French and Romanian have a superlative-dedicated phrase of the form [_{Spec, DegP} THE ER], which was obtained via grammaticalization. The rarity of languages with superlative-dedicated phrases

¹⁹ Bobaljik quotes the following languages as illustrating this general pattern: Austrian German, including Upper Austrian (Martin Prinzhorn, Martin Hackl, personal communication), and also in Maltese (in some cases with a change in word order), Neo-Aramaic (Arsanis 1968: 496), Middle Armenian (Karst 1901, 395), and, alone among the Fennic languages, Livonian (Nau 1992: 17).

²⁰ To illustrate languages that are assumed to lack the morphological distinction Bobaljik quotes some of the Celtic languages ((Modern) Irish, Manx, and Scottish Gaelic), Arabic, Klon (a Papuan language of Alor, Indonesia, as described in Baird 2008: 116) and Misanla Totonac (an indigenous language of Mexico; MacKay 1999: 413). In some of these languages the difference in interpretation depends on the presence/absence of the definite article.

of the form [_{Spec, Deg^P} THE ER] out of the high number of languages described as forming superlatives by combining comparatives and definiteness in fact illustrates the conjecture that Bobaljik thought did not exist, namely that the combination of a definite article plus the comparative is sufficient to derive a superlative meaning.

References

- Al-Bitar, Ahmad. 2019. *The Superlative in English and Syrian Arabic*. Master's thesis. Tübingen: Universität Tübingen.
- Arsanis, G.V. 1968. "Sovremennyj assirijskij jazyk". In *Jazyki narodov S.S.S.R. t. V: Mongol'skie, tunguso-man'čžurskie i paleoaziatskie jazyki*, ed. by V.V. Vinogradov, B.A. Serebrennikov, N.A. Baskakov, Ju. D. Desheriev, P. Ja. Skorik, and V.F. Beljaev, 489-507. Moscow: Nauka.
- Baird, Louise. 2008. *A Grammar of Klon: A Non-Austronesian Language of Alor*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Bobaljik, Jonathan David. 2012. *Universals in Comparative Morphology: Suppletion, Superlatives, and the Structure of Words*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Bumford, Dylan. 2017. "Split-scope Definites: Relative Superlatives and Haddock Descriptions". *Linguistics and Philosophy* 40: 549-593.
- Cinque, Guglielmo. 2010. *The Syntax of Adjectives: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Cornilescu, Alexandra and Ion Giurgea. 2013. "The adjective". In *A Reference Grammar of Romanian. I: The Noun Phrase*, ed. by Carmen Dobrovie-Sorin and Ion Giurgea, 355-529. Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Dobrovie-Sorin, Carmen and Ion Giurgea. 2006. "The Suffixation of Definite Articles in Balkan languages". *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique* 51 (1): 73-103.
- Dobrovie-Sorin, Carmen. 2021. "(In)definiteness in the Relative Readings of Quality and Quantity Superlatives". *Scolia* 35: 15-37.
- Dobrovie-Sorin, Carmen and Ion Giurgea. 2023. "A Quantificational-determiner Analysis of EST in Relative Superlatives". Submitted manuscript, h-out presented at RALFE 2023.
- Dunbar, Ewan and Alexis Wellwood. 2016. "Addressing the 'two interface' problem: Comparatives and superlatives". *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 1(1): 5, 1-29. DOI: 10.5334/gjgl.9.
- Fintel, Kai von. 1994. *Restrictions on Quantifier Domains*. PhD Dissertation. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts. <<http://semanticsarchive.net/Archive/jA3N2IwN/fintel-1994-thesis.pdf>> (07/2023).
- Gajewski, Jon. 2010. "Superlatives, NPIs and most". *Journal of Semantics* 27 (1): 125-137.
- Giurgea, Ion. 2013. "The Syntax of Determiners and Other Functional Categories". In *A Reference Grammar of Romanian. Volume I: The Noun Phrase*, ed. by Carmen Dobrovie-Sorin and Ion Giurgea, 97-174. Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Giurgea, Ion. 2022. "Superlatifs et définitude dans les langues romanes: formes similaires, structures différentes". Talk given at the XXX^e Congrès International de Linguistique et de Philologie Romane, Universidad de La Laguna, 04-09 July.
- Giusti, Giuliana. 2002. "The Functional Structure of Noun Phrase. A Bare Phrase Structure Approach". In *Functional Structure in DP and IP. The Cartography of Syntactic Structure 1*, ed. by Guglielmo Cinque, 54-90. Oxford-New York: Oxford UP.
- Giusti, Giuliana. 2015. *Nominal Syntax at the Interfaces. A Comparative Study of Languages with Articles*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Heim, Irene. 1999. *Notes on Superlatives*. Cambridge (MA): MIT <<https://semanticsarchive.net/Archive/TI1MTlhZ/Superlative.pdf>> (07/2023).
- Herdan, Simona et Yael Sharvit. 2006. "Definite and Nondefinite Superlatives and NPI Licensing". *Syntax* 9 (1): 1-31.
- Kayne, Richard. 2008. "Some Preliminary Comparative Remarks on French and Italian Definite Articles". *Jean-Roger Vergnaud*, ed. by Robert Freidin, Carlos P. Otero and Maria L. Zubizarreta, 291-321. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

- Krasikova, Sveta. 2012. "Definiteness in Superlatives". In *Logic, Language and Meaning. 18th Amsterdam Colloquium, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, December 2021. Revised Selected Papers*, ed. by Maria Aloni, Vadim Kimmelman, Floris Roelofsen, Galit Sassoon, Katrin Schulz and Matthijs Westera, 411-420. Berlin-Heidelberg: Springer.
- Loccioni, Nicoletta. 2018. *Getting "The Most" Out of Romance*. PhD Dissertation. Los Angeles, CA: University of California.
- MacKay, Carolyn J. 1999. *A Grammar of Misantra Totonac*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Matushansky, Ora. 2008. "On the attributive nature of superlatives". *Syntax* 11 (1): 26-90.
- Nau, Nicole. 1992. Der ostseefinnische Superlativ im arealen Kontext. In *Finnisch-ugrische Mitteilungen* 16/17: 13-23.
- Schwarz, Florian. 2009. *Two Types of Definites in Natural Language*. PhD Dissertation. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts.
- Szabolcsi, Anna. 1986. "Comparative Superlatives". In *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 8, ed. by Naoki Fukui, Tova Rapoport and Elizabeth Sagey, 245-266. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Szabolcsi, Anna. 2012. "Compositionality without word boundaries: (The) more and (the) most". *Semantics and Linguistic Theory (SALT)* 22: 1-25.