Comparatives and Superlatives in the Romance Languages

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Summary

Comparison expresses a relation involving two or more entities which are ordered on a scale with respect to a gradable property, called the parameter of comparison. In European languages, it is typically expressed through two constructions, comparatives and superlatives. Comparative constructions generally involve two entities, and indicate whether the compared entity shows a higher, lesser, or equal degree of the parameter with respect to the other entity, which is the standard of comparison. Superlatives set out one entity against a class of entities and indicate that the compared entity shows the highest or lowest degree of the parameter. Hence, comparatives may express either inequality (superiority or inferiority) or equality, whereas superlatives necessarily express superiority or inferiority.

In traditional grammar, the terms comparative and superlative are primarily used to refer to the morphology of adjectives and adverbs in languages with synthetic marking (cf. Eng. slow, slower, slowest). However, while Latin has such synthetic marking, modern Romance languages no longer possess productive comparative or superlative suffixes. All Romance languages use analytic markers consisting of dedicated adverbs (e.g., Fr. plus 'more', moins 'less', aussi 'as, also') and determiners (e.g., Sp./It. tanto, Ro. atât 'so much'). Superlatives are marked with the same markers and are mainly distinguished from comparatives by their association with definiteness. Another difference between comparatives and superlatives lies in the complements they license. Comparatives license a comparative complement, which may be clausal or phrasal, and which identifies the standard of comparison. As for superlatives, they license partitive PPs denoting the comparison set, which may be further specified by other PPs, a relative clause, or an infinitive clause.

The Romance languages show many similarities with respect to the morphosyntactic encoding of comparatives and superlatives, but they also display important cross-linguistic differences. These differences may be related to the status of the comparative marker, the encoding of the standard marker, ellipsis phenomena in the comparative clause, and the dependence of the superlative on the definite article.

Keywords: comparative, superlative, equality, inequality, equatives, degree, quantity, standard, synthetic, analytic
1. Introduction

Comparison expresses a relationship between at least two entities, which are ordered with respect to the degree or the amount to which they possess some gradable property (cf. Kennedy, 2006, 2007). This relationship may be expressed in two constructions: the comparative (cf. Fr. Jean est plus grand que Pierre ‘John is taller than Peter’) and the superlative (cf. Fr. Jean est le plus grand de sa classe ‘John is the tallest in his class’). Comparatives typically involve two entities, and they indicate whether the compared entity shows a higher, lower, or equal degree of the property. Hence, they may express either inequality (superiority or inferiority) or equality. Superlatives set out an entity against a whole class, and express that the entity shows the highest or lowest degree of the property with respect to all the other members of the class.

Comparative constructions involve the following five components (cf. Dixon, 2008; Haspelmath, 2015; Stassen, 1984; Stolz, 2013; Ultan, 1972):

1. The parameter denotes the gradable property with respect to which the entities are compared, and is often, but not necessarily, encoded as an adjective (cf. Fr. grand ‘tall’ in Jean est plus grand que Pierre ‘John is taller than Peter’).
2. The comparee, also called “first term of comparison,” designates the compared entity (cf. Jean).
3. The standard, or “second term of comparison,” expresses the entity against which the comparee is compared (cf. Pierre).
4. The comparative marker, also called “degree marker” or “index of comparison,” is a quantifier which ranges over degrees. It expresses orderings between the comparee and the standard with respect to the degree or amount to which they possess some property. This marker may be an inflection (cf. Eng. -er) or an adverb (cf. Fr. plus).
5. The standard marker is the grammatical marker of the standard. In Indo-European languages it may be an inflection (cf. the ablative case in Latin), a preposition (cf. It. di), a wh-word (or qu-word in Romance, cf. Fr. que, It. quanto) or a former demonstrative (cf. Eng. than, Dut. dan).

Superlatives (e.g., Fr. Jean est le plus grand de sa classe ‘John is the tallest in his class’) also involve a parameter denoting a gradable property (grand ‘tall’) and a comparee (Jean). However, the comparee is compared with a set of entities (sa classe ‘his class’), which also includes the comparee, and is called the comparison set. The superlative marker expresses whether the comparee shows the highest or lowest degree of the gradable property with respect to all the other members of the comparison set.

Latin has distinct synthetic markers for comparatives (-ior) and superlatives (-issimus), while this is no longer the case in Romance. All Romance languages have analytic comparative markers, shared by comparatives and superlatives. These are degree markers expressing either superiority (e.g., Fr. plus, It. piú ‘more’), or inferiority (e.g., Fr. moins, Sp. menos ‘less’), and in comparatives also equality (e.g., Fr. aussi ‘as’, Pt. tão ‘so’, It. tanto ‘so much’). The
major difference between comparatives and superlatives is that the latter are associated with definiteness, which is mostly expressed by a definite article. However, the Romance languages differ with respect to the syntactic encoding of definiteness with superlatives (see section 3.1).

Both in comparatives and in superlatives, the comparative markers typically modify adjectives or adverbs, but they may also head NPs, or be adjoined to verbs. The interpretation of the comparison depends on the category to which the comparative marker is adjoined: with adjectives (1a) or adverbs (1b), it expresses a degree and gives rise to a qualitative reading, whereas with nouns (1c) and with most verbs (1d) it expresses an amount and has a quantitative interpretation.

1. (French)

   a. Jean est **plus** intelligent **que** Pierre
      Jean is more intelligent than Pierre
      ‘Jean is more intelligent than Pierre’
   b. Jean lit **plus** vite **que** Pierre
      Jean reads more fast than Pierre
      ‘Jean reads faster than Pierre’
   c. Jean a lu **plus** de livres **que** Pierre
      Jean has read more of books than Pierre
      ‘Jean has read more books than Pierre’
   d. Jean travaille **plus** **que** Pierre
      Jean works more than Pierre
      ‘Jean works more than Pierre’

Another property shared by comparatives and superlatives is that both may be modified by adverbials (2), and license complements (3). The comparative complement, which may be clausal or phrasal, encodes the standard (3a), whereas the superlative complement, which is either a partitive PP or a relative clause (3b), restricts the comparison set against which the comparee is set out.

2. (French)

   a. Pierre est **beaucoup** plus grand **que** Paul.
      Pierre is much more tall than Paul
      ‘Pierre is much taller than Paul.’
   b. Pierre est **de loin** le plus grand de sa classe.
      Pierre is of far the more tall of his class
      ‘Pierre is by far the tallest of his class.’

3. (French)

   a. Marie est **plus paresseuse qu’elle n’est** intelligente/ **que** Pierre.
      Marie is more lazy than she is intelligent / than Pierre
      ‘Marie is more lazy than intelligent / than Pierre.’
   b. Il a acheté le moins cher des deux livres / qu’il a trouvé.
      he has bought the less expensive of the two books / that he has found
      ‘He has bought the cheapest of the two books / the cheapest he found.’
Both comparatives and superlatives may show ambiguities, which have been extensively studied mostly regarding English. For instance, (4) is ambiguous between at least two interpretations, paraphrased in (4a) and (4b). In (4a), John is compared with Carol, and the comparison takes scope over the subject John, whereas in (4b) Betty is compared with Carol, and the focus is on the first object of the double object construction (i.e., Betty) (Gawron, 1995).

(4) John gave Betty a more expensive present than Carol.

(i) John gave Betty a more expensive present than Carol gave Betty.
(ii) John gave Betty a more expensive present than John gave Carol.

Ambiguities also arise with superlatives, as illustrated in the much debated example in (5) (cf. Heim, 1999; Szabolcsi, 1986). This example gives rise to two different readings: (a) an absolute reading, under which John climbed the highest of all mountains, and (b) a relative reading, under which John climbed a higher mountain in a contextually salient set of climbers (cf. section 3.3).

(5) John climbed the highest mountain.

It should be noted that comparatives do not necessarily involve two entities. They may also compare the degrees to which the comparee possesses two different properties (6a), the amounts of two activities accomplished by the comparee (6b), or the amounts of one activity at two different times (6c), etc.

(6)

(French)

a. Jean est plus intelligent que riche.³
   ‘Jean is more intelligent than rich
   ‘Jean is more intelligent than he is rich.’

b. Jean dort plus qu’il ne travaille.
   ‘Jean sleeps more than he does not work
   ‘Jean sleeps more than he works.’

c. Aujourd’hui Jean a travaillé plus qu’hier.
   ‘Today Jean worked more than yesterday
   ‘Today Jean worked more than yesterday.’

Furthermore, a comparative construction may contain more than one comparative marker (7). For an account of multiheaded comparatives in Portuguese, see Marques (2006).

(7)

(Portuguese)

Mais homens compram cada vez mais produtos de cuidados pessoais
more men buy each time more products of care personal
‘More men buy always more products of personal care’
Finally, it is worth mentioning that both comparative and superlative constructions also occur with a few adjectives with inherently comparative or superlative semantics: comparatives with adjectives meaning ‘other’, ‘same’, or ‘such’, which also occur with a standard phrase (8a) (cf. Fr. autre, même, tel); superlatives with ordinals or adjectives meaning ‘only’ (cf. Fr. seul), which also establish a relation with a comparison class (8b) (see Van Peteghem, 2000, 2007).

(8)

(French)

a. Jean a lu le même livre / un autre livre que Pierre.
   Jean has read the same book / another book than Pierre
   ‘Jean read the same book as Peter / another book than Pierre.’

b. Le courage est la première des vertus.
   the courage is the first of the virtues
   ‘Courage is the first of the virtues.’

This article is structured as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of comparatives in the Romance languages. It focuses successively on the different types of comparatives to be distinguished in Romance (section 2.1), the different types of comparative markers (section 2.2), the different standard markers (section 2.3), and finally on an additional type of comparatives, called correlative comparatives (section 2.4). Section 3 deals with superlatives in Romance: the superlative marker (section 3.1), the complements of superlatives (section 3.2), and the interpretation of superlatives, more specifically the distinction between absolute and relative readings (section 3.3).

2. Comparative Constructions in Romance

This section deals with comparatives and comments successively on the different types of comparatives (section 2.1), the comparative marker (section 2.2), the standard marker (section 2.3), and correlative comparatives, which are constructed in a different way (section 2.4).

2.1 Types of Comparatives

The traditional threefold subdivision of comparatives into comparatives of superiority, inferiority, and equality is based on a semantic criterion, which takes into account the three possible orderings of degrees on a scale (cf. Fr. plus ‘more’, moins ‘less’, aussi ‘as’). However, as pointed out by Bobaljik (2012), only comparatives of superiority may be encoded morphologically in languages with synthetic marking of comparatives, whereas inferiority and equality are never expressed morphologically. Therefore, the comparative of superiority is to be considered the most basic one (cf. also Price, 1990; Rivara, 1990, 1995).

Moreover, syntactic criteria, such as the choice of the standard marker (see section 2.3), argue in favor of a twofold distinction between comparatives of inequality, on the one hand, and equatives, on the other. Indeed, in most languages, including Romance (except French),

(9)

(Spanish)

a. Juan es **más / menos** alto que Pedro.
   ‘Juan is taller/less tall than Pedro.’

b. Juan es **tan** alto como Pedro.
   ‘Juan is as tall as Pedro.’

Another difference between inequatives and equatives is that the former may contain an *expletive negation* in the standard clause in languages such as French, Italian, and Catalan (Espinal, 1991; Donati, 2000; Makri, 2013, 2018). In Catalan, expletive negation is even possible in phrasal comparative complements (10b).

(10) Expletive negation

a. (Italian)
   Maria è più alta di quanto (**non**) lo sia Giovanni.
   ‘Maria is taller than Giovanni is.’

b. (Catalan)
   En Joan té més vaques que **pas** en Pere.
   ‘Joan has more cows than Pere.’

Other classifications are based on the morphological or syntactic encoding of certain components, especially of the standard. The most basic distinction in this respect is made between clausal and phrasal comparatives: in *clausal comparatives* the standard is a clause containing a finite verb (11a), whereas in *phrasal* comparatives the standard only contains an NP or a pronoun (11b), or a PP (11c). However, the standard may also contain two constituents, with ellipsis (*gapping*) of the finite verb (11d). Comparatives with gapped standards are often referred to as *reduced comparatives*. 
Another interesting distinction between derived-case and fixed-case comparatives has been proposed by Stassen (1984). In derived-case comparatives, the NP or pronoun referring to the standard and the comparee have the same case, whereas in fixed-case comparatives the case of the standard NP or pronoun is assigned by the standard marker and is hence always the same (e.g., the ablative in Latin or the genitive in Russian). This distinction will be discussed with respect to Romance in section 2.3.3.

Another distinction, also proposed by Stassen (1984), is based on the encoding of the standard as (a) a source, (b) a goal phrase, (c) a locative phrase, (d) a direct object of a verb meaning ‘to exceed’, (e) an adversative coordinated clause, or (f) a clause headed by a particle comparative. All Romance languages fall under type (f) (i.e., the particle comparative type), characterized by the presence of a specific comparative particle heading the standard, and are mostly of the derived-case type. The particle comparative type is an areal phenomenon, found predominantly in Standard Average European, apart from some Austronesian languages (Haspelmath, 2001).

2.2 The Comparative Marker

While Latin has dedicated suffixes for marking the comparative on adjectives, alongside analytic markers (plus ‘more’, minus ‘less’), all Romance languages have exclusively analytic markers. These markers are comparative degree adverbs (e.g., Fr. plus ‘more’, Sp. tan ‘so much’), or quantitative determiners which agree in gender and number with the noun (e.g., Sp./It. tanto ‘so much/many’). Only a few synthetic comparative forms have survived in most Romance languages, except in Romanian, which has no synthetic comparatives at all. The surviving synthetic comparative forms all derive from a few basic Latin adjectives meaning ‘better’, ‘worse’, ‘bigger’, or ‘smaller’ and are, in fact, suppletive rather than synthetic, since their stem is not related to the positive form (cf. Bobaljik, 2012).
Most of these suppletive comparatives compete with the analytic comparatives and are restricted in use. For instance, in French only *meilleur* and *mieux* rule out *plus bon* and *plus bien* \(^4\), whereas *pire* ‘worse’ competes with *plus mauvais* ‘worse’ (13) (Fuchs, 2014). As for *majeur* ‘major’, *mineur* (‘minor’), and *moindre* (‘minor’), they are hardly ever used in comparative constructions (de Morais, 1965).

(13)

(French)

La situation est **pire / plus mauvaise** que je ne pensais (Fuchs, 2014, p. 47)

The situation is worse / more bad than I not thought

‘The situation is worse than I thought.’

As for the analytic markers in Romance, the superiority markers are derived either from Lat. PLUS ‘more’ (Fr. *plus*, It. *più*) or from MAGIS ‘more’ (Sp. *más*, Ro. *mai*) (cf. Table 1). Inferiority is expressed by adverbs tracing back to Lat. MINUS ‘less’ (Fr. *moins*, It. *meno*), except in Romanian, where the inferiority marker is composed of the superiority marker *mai* combined with the adverb/adjective *puţin* ‘little’. The comparative markers of equality are more diverse: French uses different markers with adjectives and adverbs (i.e., the additive adverb *aussi* meaning ‘also’), on the one hand, and with verbs and nouns (i.e., *autant* ‘as much/many’), on the other hand. The other languages mainly use demonstrative quantifiers meaning ‘so much’ deriving from Lat. TANTUM. Romanian has, in addition, manner adverbs such as *la fel de* ‘as’, lit. ‘in way of’, *tot aşa de* ‘as’, lit. ‘also so of’, the latter being reinforced by the additive marker *tot* ‘also’ (for a typology of equative markers, see Haspelmath, 2015).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Latin)</th>
<th>MELIOREM</th>
<th>PEIOREM</th>
<th>MAIOREM</th>
<th>MINOREM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. (French)</td>
<td>meilleur/mieux</td>
<td>pire/pis</td>
<td>mayor</td>
<td>menor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. (Spanish)</td>
<td>mejor</td>
<td>peor</td>
<td>mayor</td>
<td>menor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. (Portuguese)</td>
<td>melhor</td>
<td>pior</td>
<td>maior</td>
<td>menor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. (Catalan)</td>
<td>millor</td>
<td>pitjor</td>
<td>maggiore</td>
<td>minore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. (Italian)</td>
<td>migliore</td>
<td>peggio</td>
<td>maggiore</td>
<td>minore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 1. Comparative Degree Markers in Romance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Superiority</th>
<th>Inferiority</th>
<th>Equality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fr.</strong></td>
<td><em>plus (de)</em></td>
<td><em>moins (de)</em></td>
<td><em>aussi +ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>davantage (de)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>autant (de) +V/N</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pt.</strong></td>
<td><em>mais</em></td>
<td><em>menos</em></td>
<td><em>tão + ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>tanto/a/os/as + N</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sp.</strong></td>
<td><em>más</em></td>
<td><em>menos</em></td>
<td><em>tan + ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>tanto/a/os/as + N</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cat.</strong></td>
<td><em>mes</em></td>
<td><em>menys</em></td>
<td><em>tan + ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>tant/a/s/es + N</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It.</strong></td>
<td><em>più</em></td>
<td><em>meno</em></td>
<td><em>(altret)tanto + ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>(altret)tanto/a/i/e + N</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ro.</strong></td>
<td><em>mai +ADJ/ADV</em></td>
<td><em>mai puţin +ADJ/ADV</em></td>
<td><em>la fel de ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>mai mult + V</em></td>
<td><em>mai puţin + V</em></td>
<td><em>tot aşa de ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>mai mult(ă/i/e) + N</em></td>
<td><em>mai puţin (ă/i/e) + N</em></td>
<td><em>tot atât de ADJ/ADV</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>tot atât(ă/i/e) + N</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The inequality markers may all combine with adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns, whereas the equality markers display a different behavior depending on the category they combine with. With adjectives, adverbs, and verbs they are adverbial and invariable, whereas with nouns they agree in gender and number and function as determiners. An exception is French, where the categorial shift from adverb to determiner is operated through the insertion of the quantitative marker de (14b), both with the inequality and the equality markers.

(14)

a. (Italian)
   Pietro ha letto tant-i libri quant-i Marina
   ‘Pietro has read so many-M.PL book-s how many-M.PL Marina’

b. (French)
   Pierre a plus / autant de problèmes que toi
   Pierre has more / as much of problems than you
   ‘Pierre has more problems than you / as many problems as you.’

A basic difference should be noted between the Romanian comparative marker and those of the other languages. In Romanian, the comparative markers mai ‘more’, la fel de ‘as’, tot aşade ‘as’ obligatorily combine with the quantifier mult ‘much, many’ when they modify nouns or verbs (15), whereas this combination is not possible in the other Romance languages (16). The incompatibility of the comparative marker with quantifiers in the other languages shows that the comparative marker is itself a quantifier, whereas in Romanian it is not a quantifier but a grammatical marker of the comparative (Brăescu, 2017; cf. also Donazzan & Mardale, 2009). Therefore, it may only occur with adjectives and adverbs, just like the morphological -er marking in English, but not with nouns or verbs.

(15)

(Romanian)
   a. Petre are mai multe probleme decât tine.
      Petre has more many problems than you
      ‘Petre has more problems than you.’
   b. Lucrează mai mult ca tine.
      works more much than you
      ‘S/he works more than you.’

(16)

(French)
   a. Pierre a plus (*beaucoup) de problèmes que toi.
      Pierre has more (*much) of problems than you
      ‘Pierre has more problems than you.’
   b. Il travaille plus (*beaucoup) que toi.
      he works more (*much) than you
      ‘He works more than you.’
2.3 The Standard Marker

The standard marker shows many differences from one language to another. This section comments on its categorial status in the languages under study (section 2.3.1), the correlation between the standard marker and the comparative marker (section 2.3.3), and the distinction between clausal and phrasal standard markers (section 2.3.3).

2.3.1 Categorial Status

In comparatives of inequality, Latin has both analytic and synthetic means for expressing the standard (viz., the complementizer quam and the ablative case). These markers are in complementary distribution, the ablative being preferred in negative structures and in rhetorical questions (Ledgeway, 2012, p. 23). In contrast, in Romance all standard markers are analytic, and may even be composed of several items (e.g., Sp. de + cuanto, Sp./Pt. de + article + que).

Contrary to English, which has dedicated standard markers (than for inequatives; as for equatives), Romance languages use mostly polyvalent markers, such as wh-words and prepositions. Regarding their categorial status, three types of standard markers may be distinguished: (a) wh-words, (b) the preposition de/di ‘of’, and (c) markers combining the preposition de with a wh-word. In equatives, the standard marker is always a wh-word in Romance, whereas inequative standard markers may be of the three types.

- Inequative standard markers:
  o wii-words (Fr./Sp./Cat./Pt. que, It. che, Ro. ca < Lat. QUAM “than”)
  o preposition (It. di < Lat. DE)
  o hybrid markers: (i) DE + QUANTUS > Sp. de cuanto, It. di quanto, Ro. decát;
    (ii) de + definite article + que: Sp. del que / de lo/la/los/las que, Pt. do que

- Equative standard markers, deriving from the Latin QUAM (‘than’), QUOMODO (‘in which manner’ or QUANTUS (‘how much’):
  o Lat. QUAM > Fr. que, It. che, Ro. ca
  o Lat. QUOMODO > Fr. comme, Sp./Pt. como, Cat. com, It. come (< QUOMODO ET),
    Ro. cum
  o Lat. QUANTUS > It. quanto, Sp. cuanto, Ro. cat

French is the only language which uses the same marker que in all types of comparatives, whether equatives or inequatives, clausal or phrasal. In the other languages, the choice of the standard marker depends on the type of comparative marker (e.g., inequative vs. equative) (cf. section 2.3.2), and the category of the comparative complement (e.g., clausal vs. phrasal) (cf. section 2.3.3).
In all ancient Romance languages, the preposition *de* ‘of’ could be used as a standard marker in phrasal inequatives, which is no longer the case in most languages (17a,b) (but see Italian (26c)). However, in all contemporary Romance languages it is used with NPs containing a numeral, to express a higher or lower quantity than expressed by the numeral (17c,d,e).

(17)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. (Portuguese)</th>
<th>b. (Romanian)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ela é mais alta do que / <em>de</em> mim</td>
<td>Ea este mai înaltă decât / <em>de</em> mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she is more tall than of me</td>
<td>she is more tall than of me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘She is taller than me.’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>c. (French)</th>
<th>d. (Spanish)</th>
<th>e. (Romanian)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plus de dix livres</td>
<td>más de diez libros</td>
<td>mai mult de zece cărți</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more of ten books</td>
<td>more of ten books</td>
<td>more much of ten books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘more than ten books’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.3.2 The Correlation Between the Standard Marker and the Comparative Marker

In Romance, most equative standard markers differ from inequative ones. Nevertheless, in three languages the standard markers are neutral with respect to this distinction: Fr. *que*, Sp. *que*, Ro. *ca*. All other markers are specific to one type: the prepositional markers *de/di* and the hybrid markers Pt. *do que*, Ro. *decât*, It. *di quanto* only occur in inequatives, whereas the markers derived from Lat. QUOMODO and QUANTUS are specific to equatives.

The choice of the standard marker is also dependent on the presence or absence of the comparative marker. In inequatives the presence of a comparative marker in the main clause is obligatory, whereas equatives may occur without a comparative marker. In this case, the Romance languages use the markers derived from Lat. QUOMODO (+ ET) ‘like (and)’ or from QUANTUS (‘how much’), while Romanian uses *ca* (< Lat. QUAM). Fr. *comme* and It. *come* can only occur in the absence of a degree marker, while their counterparts in Ibero-Romance and Romanian *ca* may occur with or without degree marker in the main clause.

(18)

a. (French)  
Le champignon est (*aussi*) grand comme un parapluie.  
the mushroom is (*as) big like an umbrella  
‘The mushroom is as big as an umbrella.’

b. (Italian)  
Gianni è (tanto) intelligente come/quanto Maria. (Belletti, 1991, p. 833)  
Gianni is (so.much) intelligent like / how.much Maria  
‘Gianni is as intelligent as Maria.’

Furthermore, the choice of the standard marker may also be constrained by the morphosyntactic type of the comparative marker. For instance, the QUANTUS markers can only be licensed by degree markers of the TANTUS type and not by other markers. Thus, they give rise to correlative patterns of the type It. *tanto ... quanto ...* (19). With nominal parameters, both the degree marker *tanto* and the standard markers It. *quanto* / Sp. *cuanto* agree in
gender and number with the noun. In equatives, the correlative pattern is obligatory in Italian (19a), whereas in Spanish the TANTUS markers may also license the QUOMODO markers instead of the QUANTUS markers (19b).

\[(19)\]

a. (Italian)
Gianni è tanto intelligente quanto Maria / *come Maria (Belletti, 1991)
Gianni is so.much intelligent how.much Mary / like Maria
‘Gianni is as intelligent as Maria.’
b. (Spanish)
Puedes llevar tant-os libros cuant-os / como necesites
can.2SG take so.many-M.PL books how.many-M.PL / like need.2SG
‘You can take as many books as you need.’

### 2.3.3 Clausal Versus Phrasal Standard Markers

One of the most debated issues in the literature on comparatives is the relationship between clausal and phrasal standards. In Generative Grammar, phrasal standards have been analyzed as elliptic versions of their clausal counterparts and have been accounted for in terms of deletion (Bacskai-Atkari, 2018; Bresnan, 1973; Corver, 2006; Kennedy, 1999, 2000; Kennedy & Merchant, 2000). Two types of deletion are distinguished: (a) **Comparative Subdeletion** (i.e., the omission of the degree marker in the standard), and (b) **Comparative Deletion**, which refers to the omission of the redundant lexical content.

**Comparative Subdeletion** was first defined by Bresnan (1973), who postulates the presence of an empty category inside the standard. This empty category is a variable which ranges over degrees or amounts (cf. (20a)) and has been identified by Chomsky (1977) as an instance of wh-movement of a null operator. Chomsky’s main argument supporting this hypothesis is that in many dialects of American English overt wh-movement occurs in comparatives (20b).

\[(20)\]

a. Mary read more books than Op: John read [t]\_ many\_ magazines
b. John is taller than what Mary is. (Chomsky, 1977)

In Romance, this analysis is supported by the overt presence of quantitative wh-markers in certain comparative clauses in Italian (21) and in Spanish (22). In Italian, the presence of the wh-marker is even obligatory in clausal inequatives, which are always headed by *di quanto* (21b).

\[(21)\]

(Italian)
a. Paolo ha mangiato più biscotti [PP di [CP\_ wh quant\_i] ne ha mangiati [-i: Maria]]
Paolo has eaten more cookies of how.many-M.PL of.them has eaten Maria
‘Paolo has eaten more cookies than those that Maria has eaten.’ (Donati, 1997)
b. Gianni ha scritto più articoli di *(quant\_i) tu credu
Gianni has written more articles of how.many-M.PL you believe-SBJV
‘Gianni has written more articles than you think.’
In contrast, the deletion of the wh-marker is obligatory in Portuguese in inequatives (23), and in French both in equatives and inequatives (24).

(23)

(Portuguese)
O Luís é mais inteligente do que (*quanto) o João é trabalhador
the Luís is more intelligent than how.much the João is hard-working
‘Luís is more intelligent than João is hard-working’

(24)

(French)
Jean est plus / aussi intelligent que (*combinant) Pierre est travailleur
Jean is more / as intelligent than/as how.much Pierre is hard-working
‘Jean is more / as intelligent than / as Pierre is hard-working’

As for Comparative Deletion, it affects redundant lexical material, which can mostly be recovered. However, the optionality or obligatoriness of the deletion differs from one language to another, and within one language also from one standard marker to another. Comparative Deletion is optional with the following standard markers: Fr. que, Pt. do que, Ro. decât in inequatives; Ro. cât, It. quanto (but not with inequative di quanto) and the QUOMODO markers in equatives in all Romance languages, except for Romanian cum, which always heads clausal complements. In other words, all these markers can occur with clausal, phrasal, or reduced comparative complements.

However, in Spanish and Italian inequatives Comparative Deletion is dependent on the standard marker. In Spanish, the finite verb is always deleted with the standard marker que, which may only combine with one or two phrases (25), but not with a finite clause (except under certain conditions, see Reglero, 2006, 2007). 6

(25)

(Spanish)
Juan compró más libros que María / que María (*compró) periódicos
Juan bought more books than María / than María bought newspapers
‘Juan bought more books than María / than María bought newspapers’

In Italian, che is used with a phrasal standard when it is associated with a comparee occurring inside the VP (cf. (26a,b); see Napoli & Nespor, 1986), whereas di is used when the standard is associated with a comparee occurring outside the VP (i.e., a subject (26c)).
In reduced inequatives (i.e., those showing gapping), *che* is the only standard marker allowed (27a), whereas in reduced equatives the standard is headed by *quanto* (27b). Since gapping typically occurs in coordination, Napoli and Nespor (1986) and Sáez del Alamo (1999) analyze It. *che* and Sp. *que* as coordinating connectors. The same analysis is put forward by Matos and Brito (2002) for Portuguese *do que*.

(27)

(Italian)

a. Gli ospiti hanno mangiato più dolci che / *di* salatini.
   The guests have eaten more sweets than / of crackers
   ‘The guests have eaten more sweets than crackers.’

b. Luca è più furbo *che* / *di* intelligente. (Napoli & Nespor, 1986)
   Luca is more shrewd than / of intelligent
   ‘Luca is more shrewd than intelligent.’

c. Gianni è più adatto a questo incarico *di me* / *che* me. (Belletti, 1991)
   Gianni is more suited to this task of me / than me
   ‘Gianni is more suited for this task than me.’

In other words, Sp. *que* and It. *che* may never head comparative clauses containing a finite verb. In both languages, clausal inequatives are always headed by the preposition *de/di* + a relative clause. The relative clause may be free (28a), (21a), (22), or headed by a definite article in Spanish (28b) or a demonstrative pronoun in Italian (29).

(28)

(Spanish)

a. Compré más peras *de cuant-as* hayas podido comprar tú.
   I bought more pears of how.much-F.PL have.SUB.2SG could buy you:SG
   ‘I bought more pears than you could buy.’

b. Juan compró más periódicos [PP *de* [CF los *que* compró María]]
   Juan bought more newspapers of the.M.PL that bought Maria
   ‘Juan bought more newspapers than those that Maria bought.’ (Brucart, 2003)

(29)

(Italian)

Gianni si è mostrato più adatto a questo incarico *di quello che* speravamo
Gianni REF I.REFL is shown more suited to this task of that what hoped.1PL
‘Gianni has proved that he was more suited for this task then we hoped.’
The complex standard markers in Portuguese (do que ‘than’, lit. of the that) and in Romanian (decât ‘than’, lit. of how much) are, in fact, grammaticalizations of relative constructions similar to the ones found, respectively, in Spanish and in Italian (Van Peteghem, 2009). The advanced grammaticalization of these markers is apparent from several of their properties.

1. They tend to be invariable because of merging.

2. In neither language can de head the standard on its own. This shows that the prepositional element included in the standard marker is not a preposition (Matos & Brito, 2002, 2008).

3. In both languages, they can occur both with phrasal ((30a), (31a)) and clausal ((30b), (31b)) standards.

(30)

(31)

It should be noted that certain standard markers of the wh-type may also head phrasal standards, and even behave like prepositions in that they assign the accusative to pronominal phrasal standards associated with the subject, which are expected to be nominative. This occurs with the equative quanto and come in Italian, even when quanto is inflected (cf. (32); see also Belletti, 1991), and also with Ro. decât, cât and ca (cf. (33); see Brăescu, 2017; Van Peteghem, 2009).

(32)
This shows that these standard markers fall under the fixed-case type as defined by Stassen (1984) (see section 2.1). In contrast, comparatives in Ibero-Romance and French fall under the derived-case type, like most particle comparative languages. The fixed-case type cannot be accounted for by the Comparative Deletion hypothesis, and is one of the main arguments against a derivational analysis of phrasal comparatives (Heim, 1985; Napoli, 1983).

### 2.3.4 The Standard Marker in Romance: Summary

Romance languages have both prepositional (cf. *de/di*) and clausal (*wh*-words) standard markers. However, the choice of these markers is not necessarily correlated with the categorization of the standard. It depends in the first place on the opposition between inequatives and equatives: equative standards can only be headed by *wh*-words, whereas inequative standards can be headed either by prepositional or clausal markers. Moreover, prepositional markers may head clausal standards encoded as relatives (cf. inequatives in Spanish and Italian), and, conversely, clausal markers may head phrasal standards, and even assign the accusative to the pronominal standard, just like prepositions (cf. It. *quanto*, Ro. *ca*). This complex situation is the result of both the frequent deletion phenomena to which comparative clauses are subject and different grammaticalization processes of the standard marker. French has the most grammaticalized standard marker (*que* in equatives and inequatives, whether they are phrasal, clausal, or reduced), followed by Portuguese *do que* and Romanian *decât*, which are, however, restricted to inequatives. In contrast, Spanish and Italian standards are sensitive to both the inequative and equative distinction and the category of the standard.

### 2.4 Correlative Comparatives

Comparative markers also occur in correlative comparatives. These are constructions composed of two clauses starting each with a comparative phrase (cf. Eng. *The more mistakes you make, the more interesting it becomes*). They express parallel increase or decrease, and are interpreted as conditional sentences in that they may be paraphrased as “If P, then Q” (cf. *If you make more mistakes, it becomes more interesting*) (Culicover & Jackendoff, 1999).

In Romance, two syntactic patterns are available for correlative comparatives:

1. a symmetric pattern combining two clauses starting with the comparative marker (cf. *più ‘more’* in (34a)), which allows the insertion of a coordinating conjunction (*e ‘and’* in (34a));
2. 

(33) (Romanian)

I am more good than you.ACC / I am also so of small as you / how much you.ACC

‘I am better than you / I am as small as you.’
an asymmetric pattern, in which the comparative marker is premodified by a relative element in one clause (cf. \textit{cuanto} in (34b)), and in the other clause by a demonstrative (\textit{tanto} in (34b)), which is optional in certain languages (34b). The clause containing the relative pronoun mostly precedes the clause containing the demonstrative (34b), but it may also follow (34c).

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(34)]
\begin{enumerate}
\item (Italian) \textit{Più} legg-o \ (e) \textit{più} capisc-o.
more read-1SG \ (and) \ more understand-1SG
\end{enumerate}
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Spanish) \textit{Cuanto más} le-o, \ (\textit{tanto}) más entiend-o.
how.much more read-1SG, \ (so.much) more \ understand-1SG
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Spanish) Una alianza será \textit{tanto más} fuerte \textit{cuanto} mayor.
an \ alliance will.be \ so.much more strong how.much bigger
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (French) \textit{Plu}s je lis, \ \textit{plus} je suis confus.
more \ I \ read \ more \ I \ am \ confused
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Romanian) \textit{Cu} \textit{cât} e mai dificil lucrul, \textit{cu} \textit{atât} e mai necesar.
with \ how.much \ is \ more \ difficult \ thing,\the \ with \ so.much \ is \ more \ necessary
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Italian) \textit{Più} legg-o \ (e) \textit{più} capisc-o.
more read-1SG \ (and) \ more understand-1SG
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Spanish) \textit{Cuanto más} le-o, \ (\textit{tanto}) más entiend-o.
how.much more read-1SG, \ (so.much) more \ understand-1SG
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Spanish) Una alianza será \textit{tanto más} fuerte \textit{cuanto} mayor.
an \ alliance will.be \ so.much more strong how.much bigger
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (French) \textit{Plu}s je lis, \ \textit{plus} je suis confus.
more \ I \ read \ more \ I \ am \ confused
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Romanian) \textit{Cu} \textit{cât} e mai dificil lucrul, \textit{cu} \textit{atât} e mai necesar.
with \ how.much \ is \ more \ difficult \ thing,\the \ with \ so.much \ is \ more \ necessary
\end{enumerate}

Ibero-Romance and Italian have both patterns, whereas French has only the symmetric pattern (35a), and Romanian only the asymmetric one (35b). In Romanian, both \textit{cât} ‘how much’ and \textit{atât} ‘that much’ are headed by the preposition \textit{cu} ‘with’.

\begin{enumerate}
\item (French) \textit{Plu}s je lis, \ \textit{plus} je suis confus.
more \ I \ read \ more \ I \ am \ confused
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (Romanian) \textit{Cu} \textit{cât} e mai dificil lucrul, \textit{cu} \textit{atât} e mai necesar.
with \ how.much \ is \ more \ difficult \ thing,\the \ with \ so.much \ is \ more \ necessary
\end{enumerate}

The symmetric pattern can be analyzed as a particular case of coordination, whereas in the asymmetric pattern the clause containing the \textit{quantus} marker is subordinated to the one with the \textit{tantus} marker (see Abeillé & Borsley, 2008).

\section{3. Superlative Constructions in Romance}

Like comparatives, superlatives express a comparison between degrees or amounts. However, while comparatives involve two entities, superlatives set out one entity against a set of entities, called the \textit{comparison set}, which also includes the comparee. They indicate that the comparee shows a higher or lower degree of the parameter than all the other members of the comparison set. Hence, they may be subdivided into superlatives of superiority and inferiority.

Since superlatives share many properties with comparatives, they have often been analyzed in terms of comparatives constructions (Farkas & Kiss, 2000; Gawron, 1995; Heim, 1985; Szabolcsi, 1986). Like comparatives, they may modify adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs (cf. section 3.1), and their interpretation is subject to scope phenomena (section 3.3).
Nevertheless, they also exhibit many differences with comparatives. The most important

differences are that (a) unlike comparatives, they are dependent on definiteness (cf. section

3.1), and (b) they license different types of complements (cf. section 3.2). Therefore,

superlative and comparative phrases may not be coordinated (36a) (Bosque & Brucart, 1991).

Another important difference is that superlatives may be used as definite NPs without a head

noun (36b), whereas comparatives allow the ellipsis of the head noun exclusively in indefinite

NPs (36c).

(36)

(Spanish)

a. *los niños más despiertos que sus compañeros y más trabajadores de todos
   the children more watchful than their schoolmates and more hard-working of all
b. el más sabio de los hombres
   the more wise of the men
   ‘the wisest of men’
c. Conocí a uno más sabio.
   met.1SG ACC one more wise
   ‘I met a wiser one.’

The following sections will deal with the dependence of the superlative on definite markers in

Romance (section 3.1), the complements licensed by superlatives (section 3.2), and the

interpretation of superlatives (section 3.3).

3.1 The Superlative Marker and Definiteness

While in Latin, English, and several other languages, the superlative marker is different from

the comparative marker (cf. Lat. -issimus vs. -ior, Eng. -est / most vs. -er / more), the Romance

languages use the same marker for the superlative as for the comparative (cf. Fr. plus ‘more’,

moins ‘less’, etc.). Moreover, adjectives with a suppletive comparative use the same suppletive

form for the superlative (37b). As shown in (37), the superlative interpretation arises from the

association of the comparative marker with definiteness.

(37)

(French)

a. Ces fleurs sont les plus belles. vs. a’ Ces fleurs sont plus belles.
   these flowers are the more beautiful
   ‘These flowers are the most beautiful.’
   these flowers are more beautiful
   ‘These flowers are more beautiful.’

b. Ces bonbons sont les meilleurs.
   these sweets are the better
   ‘These sweets are the best.’
   b’ Ces bonbons sont meilleurs.
   these sweets are better
   ‘These sweets are better.’

In most semantic analyses, the dependence of superlatives on definiteness is attributed to the

fact that the superlative morpheme imposes a uniqueness requirement on its individual

argument (Farkas & Kiss, 2000; Heim, 1985; Herdan & Sharvit, 2006; Szabolcsi, 1986). In

syntax, it has been explained by the fact that the superlative adjective always occurs in an

attributive position, even when the noun is not overtly present (Matushansky, 2008).

Nevertheless, the encoding of the superlative, its distribution, and its dependence on the

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definite article differ from one Romance language to another. A major difference concerns definiteness marking with superlatives, which may be summarized as follows: in Romanian and in French, the definite marker is part of the superlative marker, whereas this is not the case in Ibero-Romance and in Italian.

In Romanian, the superlative is built up from the determiner *cel* + the comparative marker (Croitor & Giurgea, 2016; Pană Dindelegan, 2013; Teodorescu, 2007) (see article “Morphological and Syntactic Variation and Change in Romanian” in this encyclopedia). *Cel* derives from a demonstrative and is called “adjectival article” or “strong definite article.” It is different from the definite article (which is enclitic in Romanian), and functions as a kind of ‘last resort’ article when the enclitic article is not syntactically appropriate (Campos, 2005). Its presence is required in contexts excluding the use of the enclitic article, such as nouns modified by numerals or NPs without a head noun (Pană Dindelegan, 2013, pp. 309–319).

(38)

(Romanian)

a. *cel* doi copii
   the.M.PL two children
   ‘the two children’

b. *cel* mare
   the.M.SG big
   ‘the big one’

As an inherent part of the superlative marker, *cel* is present in all uses of the superlative in Romanian: with prenominal, postnominal, and predicative adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns. In the latter two cases, the superlative marker requires the presence of the quantifier *mult*, just as in comparatives (cf. section 2.2).

(39)

(Romanian)

a. *cel* mai deștept-e fet-e
   the.F.PL more intelligent-F.PL girl(F)-PL
   ‘the smartest girls’

b. fet-e *cel* mai deștept-e
   girl(PL)-the.F.PL the.F.PL more intelligent-F.PL
   ‘the smartest girls’

c. Maria lucrează *cel* mai mult
   Maria works the more much
   ‘Maria works the most.’

d. Ion a interviuvat *cel* mai mult-e fet-e
   Ion has interviewed the.F.PL more many-F.PL girl(F)-PL
   ‘Ion interviewed the most girls.’

As argued by Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2013, p. 164), [*cel mai* + AP] form a constituent. This is apparent from the fact that the superlative can occur inside an indefinite NP (40a), and that *cel* may not be separated from the comparative marker (40b).
Thus, the determiner *cel* clearly differentiates the superlative from the comparative, which in Romanian can co-occur with the enclitic definite article without losing its comparative interpretation, but not with *cel* (Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea, 2013, p. 165).

The other Romance languages do not have a specific definite marker for the superlative and use the definite article. However, important differences are to be noted between French, on the one hand, and Ibero-Romance and Italian, on the other, with respect to their constraints on the presence of the definite article.

In French, the superlative always co-occurs with the definite article, which, like in Romanian, may be considered as part of the superlative marker. The definite article is obligatory with adjectives, whether they occur in prenominal (42a’), postnominal (42a), or predicative position (42b, b’), as well as with verbs (42c), adverbs (42c’), and nouns (42d). When the superlative quantifies on nouns, the quantitative *de* is inserted (42d), like in comparatives (see also (14b)).

(French)

42

a. les filles le plus intelligentes. a’ les plus belles filles
the girls the more intelligent.F.PL the more beautiful.F.PL girls
‘the most intelligent girls’

b. Elle était la plus belle de la soirée.
she was the more beautiful of the evening
‘She was the prettiest of the evening.’

b’ C’est avec son premier mari qu’elle était le plus heureuse.
it is with her first husband that she was the more happy
‘It is with her first husband that she was the happiest.’

c. Marie travaille le plus. c’ Marie travaille le plus vite.
Marie works the more Marie works the more quickly
‘Marie works the most.’

d. Jean a interviewé le plus de filles.
Jean has interviewed the more of girls
‘Jean interviewed the most girls.’
In prenominal position (42a'), the article of the superlative is shared with that of the definite NP containing the superlative. This sharing has been explained as a haplology (i.e., deletion under identity) of the second article (Barbaud, 1976; Plank, 2003, pp. 360–363).

For what concerns the gender/number of the article, the masculine singular form occurs when the superlative is used with verbs, adverbs, and nouns (42c,c',d). When it is used with an attributive adjective, the article agrees in gender/number with the head noun of the NP (42a,a'), even when the noun is elliptic. In predicative position, it agrees with the adjective and the elliptic noun when the comparison set contains entities (42b); when the comparison set is made up of states (cf. different degrees of happiness in (42b')), it is invariable.

Although the definite article may be considered part of the superlative in French, its link with the superlative is not as tight as in Romanian. Cardinals and numerals (43a,b) may be inserted, and the article is absent in possessive NPs (43c) and in superlatives depending on ce que [...] de (43c). However, it should be noted that the superlative cannot co-occur with demonstratives (43e) (Coppock & Strand, 2019).

(French)

a. les treize plus grands lacs d’Afrique
   the thirteen more big lakes of Africa
   ‘the thirteen biggest lakes of Africa’

b. le deuxième plus grand pays du monde
   the second more big country of the world
   ‘the second largest country in the world’

c. ma plus belle histoire d’amour
   my more beautiful story of love
   ‘my most beautiful love story’

d. Ce que j’ai de plus cher, c’est mon souvenir.
   that what I have of more dear, that is my memory
   ‘What I have dearest is my memory.’

e. *cette plus belle histoire d’amour
   this more beautiful story of love

In contrast, in the other Romance languages the definite article is not part of the superlative. It is adjacent to the superlative only when it modifies an attributive adjective in prenominal position, but not in postnominal position (44a). With predicative adjectives, the article only occurs when the adjectival predicate occurs in the main clause (44b), but not when the superlative adjective is used as a predicate inside a relative clause, as in (44c).
When the superlative marker occurs with verbs, adverbs, or nouns, the definite article cannot be used in Italian and Spanish. Therefore, the superlative interpretation can only arise when the context signals uniqueness, through PPs referring to the comparison class (45a), or relative clauses with a definite antecedent (45b) (cf. Bosque & Brucart, 1991; Coppock & Strand, 2019).

(45)

a. (Italian) Di tutte queste ragazze, Marisa lavora più diligentemente.
   of all these girls Marisa works more diligently
   ‘Of all these girls, Marisa works the most diligently.’

b. (Spanish) Juan es el que corre más rápido. vs. b’ Juan corre más rápido.
   Juan is he who runs more fast       Juan runs more fast
   ‘Juan is the one who runs the fastest.’ ‘Juan runs faster.’

This shows that, in Ibero-Romance and in Italian, the definite article is not an inherent part of the superlative. It is present only when it is required as a determiner of the NP. As a consequence, the superlative phrase is encoded in these languages in exactly the same way as the comparative phrase, which led Parker (1926) to the conclusion that in Spanish the superlative is an illusion. In the absence of a specific marker, the superlative interpretation is only obtained by its association with definiteness occurring in the context.

The differences between Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian, on the one hand, and French and Romanian, on the other, show that the superlative exhibits a different stage of grammaticalization in these languages. In Ibero-Romance and Italian, it is not part of the superlative marker and, hence, is not grammaticalized. In contrast, in French and in Romanian the definite article of the superlative is present in contexts where no noun can be postulated (i.e., adverbs and verbs) and where the adjective is not attributive. The definite component of the superlative is the most grammaticalized in Romanian, where superlatives have a definite marker different from the enclitic definite article, which may not be separated from the comparative marker; whereas in French the definite article can be left out under certain conditions (e.g., with possessives).
3.2 The Complements of Superlatives

Like the comparative, the superlative may license complements. These may be of three types: PPs, relative clauses, or infinitive clauses headed by a preposition. All these complements constrain the comparison set in which the compared entity is to be included, and against which it stands out as showing the highest or lowest degree of the relevant property.

The PPs are headed by the preposition *de* ‘of’, or another preposition with partitive meaning (Fr. *parmi* ‘among’, *d’entre* ‘among’, Ro. *din* ‘of’, *dintre* ‘among’, It. *fra* ‘among’, *tra* ‘among’, etc.). They may also refer to the locative or temporal range in which the entity is located (cf. Sp. *en el mundo entero* ‘in the whole world’, *en toda la historia* ‘in all of history’).

The relative clauses licensed by superlatives differ from other types of relatives in several ways:

1. In French, but not in the other Romance languages, relatives licensed by superlatives may occur with adverbs (48).

2. They are the only relatives, outside averidical and modal environments, that allow the subjunctive mood instead of the indicative in Romance (49). The indicative restricts the comparison set to a definite set of alternatives, whereas the subjunctive ranges over all possible alternatives (Kampers-Manhe, 1991). The use of the subjunctive has been attributed to the presence of a negative entailment regarding the comparison class.

3. This negative entailment may also account for the possible presence of negative polarity items when the verb occurs in the subjunctive (cf. Fr. *jamais* in (49); see Sleeman, 2010).
In French and in Italian, the superlative may also license infinitival clauses, called *non-modal infinitival relative clauses* (Sleeman, 2010) (50a,b). These differ from modal infinitival clauses (50c) in that they have no modal interpretation. Moreover, the head noun is interpreted as the subject of the infinitive (see article “Infinitival Clauses in the Romance Languages” in this encyclopedia), and not as an object as in modal infinitival relatives. Like finite relative clauses, they may contain negative polarity items (cf. Fr. *jamais* in (50b)). For an analysis of these infinitival clauses in French, see Sleeman (2010).

(50)

a. (Italian)
È il più giovane ad aver giocato in serie A.
*is the more young to have played in Serie A*
‘He’s the youngest to have played in the Premier League.’

b. (French)
Il est le soliste le plus jeune à avoir jamais joué avec cet orchestre.
*he is the soloist the more young to have ever played with this orchestra*
‘He is the youngest soloist to have ever played with this orchestra.’

c. (French)
Il a trois articles à lire.
*he has three articles to read*
‘He has to read three articles.’

### 3.3 Absolute Versus Relative Superlatives

In traditional grammar, a distinction is made between relative and absolute superlatives. However, this distinction does not coincide with the one put forward by Szabolcsi (1986) and Heim (1999), which is often referred to through the same terms, as mentioned in section 1. The traditional distinction, as found in Latin grammars, comes from the polysemy of the Latin suffix *-issimus*, which has two interpretations: (a) a “relative” one, under which an entity is set out against a comparison set, and (b) a so-called absolute one, under which the superlative marker expresses an extreme degree of the relevant property, without any reference to a comparison set and which is in fact an elative interpretation (51a). The outcome of Latin *-ISSIMUS* is still productive in Ibero-Romance and in Italian, and to a lesser extent in French (cf. *richissime* ‘very rich’). However, it no longer expresses a comparison but marks a very high degree and, hence, has only an elative meaning. It displays a completely different syntax in that it does not require a comparison set.

(51)

a. (Latin)
mons alt-issimus
*mountain high-SUP*
(i) ‘the highest mountain’; (ii) ‘a very high mountain’

b. (Spanish)
un hombre inteligent-isimo
*a man intelligent-SUP*
‘a very intelligent man’
In other words, the so-called relative and absolute interpretations of the Latin suffix -issimus correspond with two completely different markers in Romance: the absolute superlative marker -issimus has survived as an elative marker in Romance, but mostly expressed through adverbs meaning 'very, extremely', while the relative superlative is expressed through analytic comparative markers (Fr. le plus, It. (il) più, Sp. (el) más). Consequently, the definition of the notion of superlative has been restricted to what the grammatical tradition calls the "relative interpretation."

Nevertheless, as mentioned in section 1, the terms absolute and relative superlatives are still used in the literature but defined in a different way. Since the studies by Szabolcsi (1986) and Heim (1999), they refer to two readings of the superlative, as in (52).

(52)
John climbed the highest mountain

This example gives rise to two interpretations: (a) an absolute interpretation, under which John climbed the highest mountain in our world (i.e., Mount Everest), and (b) a relative one (also called comparative reading), under which John climbed a mountain that is higher than the mountains climbed by anyone else in the relevant comparison set. The two readings have been accounted for in terms of scope ambiguity (Farkas & Kiss, 2000; Heim, 1999; Sharvit & Stateva, 2002; Szabolcsi, 1986). On an absolute reading, the superlative marker operates inside the superlative phrase, and the comparison set is determined based on the descriptive content of the superlative phrase (i.e., the highest mountains in the world). On a relative reading, the superlative has scope outside the superlative phrase, and the comparison set is made up of mountains as objects of a relevant set of climbing events with different agents (e.g., the mountains climbed by John and his friends).

The same ambiguity is observed in the Romance languages. For instance, in Romanian, both readings are possible with attributive adjectives, in postnominal as well as in prenominal position (Teodorescu, 2007).

(53)
(Romanian)
Ana a urcat munte-le cel mai înalt / cel mai înalt munte.
Ana has climbed mountain=the the more high / the more high mountain
‘Ana climbed the highest mountain.’

However, the two readings can only occur with quality superlatives. With quantity superlatives, as in (54), the only available reading is the relative one (Coppock & Strand, 2019; Teodorescu, 2007).

(54)
(Italian)
Dei nostri amici Luigi è quello che ha più soldi of.the.M.PL our friends Luigi is that. one who has more money
‘Of our friends, Luigi is the one who has the most money’
In certain languages, quantity superlatives also allow another interpretation, called proportional reading, as in (55). In this example, the superlative has no comparative reading but specifies that a high proportion of the class of entities has the relevant property. This interpretation is available in the English example (55a) and also in Romanian (55b), but not in the other Romance languages, which use in this case nouns meaning ‘the biggest part’ (cf. Fr. la plupart des, lit. the most part of, Sp. la mayoría de ‘the majority of’) (Coppock & Strand, 2019; Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea, 2013)

(55)
a. (English)
   Most children respect their parents.

b. (Romanian)
   Cei mai mulți elevi din clasa mea au plecat devreme.
   ‘Most students of my class have left early.’

### 3.4 Superlatives in Romance: Summary

In Romance, the superlative degree markers are the same as the comparative inequality markers. However, superlatives show two important differences with respect to comparatives: (a) they are dependent on definiteness, and (b) they license different complements. For what concerns (a), the Romance languages fall into two groups: in French and Romanian, the article is part of the superlative marker, whereas in Italian and Ibero-Romance the definite article is not linked to the superlative marker. Regarding (b), Romance languages show many similarities: the superlative complement is encoded as a PP or a relative clause (or as a non-modal infinitive clause in French and Italian).

### Discussion of the Literature

The literature on comparatives and superlatives is extremely vast, especially for English, but less so for Romance languages. For English, the most debated issue regarding comparatives is deletion, which has first been discussed by Bresnan (1973). For a study of deletion in English and French, see Pinkham (1983). For a general overview of comparatives in French, see Fuchs (2014); for Spanish, see Sáez del Alamo (1999); for Italian Belletti (1991); for a comparison between French and Spanish, see Price (1990).

The following studies are concerned with specific issues regarding comparatives in one Romance language: Napoli and Nespor (1986) study the competition between the standard markers di and che in Italian; Reglero (2007) deals with gapping in comparatives in Spanish; Matos and Brito (2008) analyze the status of the comparative marker do que in Portuguese; Brăescu (2017) examines the evolution of comparative degree markers and standard markers in Romanian. For typological studies on comparatives, see Ultan (1972), Dixon (2008), Stassen (1984), Haspelmath (2015).

As for superlatives, the most debated topic is their interpretation, more specifically the distinction between absolute and relative readings of superlatives (Heim, 1999; Szabolcsi, 1986). This topic is discussed for Romance in Loccioni (2018) and for Romanian in Teodorescu (2007, 2009) and Croitor and Giurgea (2016). Other studies concentrate
on the syntactic position of superlatives (Matushansky, 2008), their dependence on definiteness (Coppock & Strand, 2019), their use in relative clauses in Spanish (Bosque & Brucart, 1991), their modification by relatives in French (Van Peteghem, 2007), and modal superlatives in Romance (Loccioni, 2019).

**References**


1. It must be noted that most languages do not have comparative markers. They belong to what Stassen (1984, p. 157) calls the “exceed type”, which expresses inequality through an ‘exceed’ verb (see section 2.1).

2. The suffix -issimus has survived in Romance (except Romanian) and expresses a high degree (cf. Fr. richissime ‘very rich’, Sp. baratisimo ‘very cheap’, Pt. belissimo ‘very beautiful’, Cat. llarguissim ‘very long’, It. bellissimo ‘very beautiful’), but it can no longer be used with a comparative meaning (cf. section 3.3).

4. *Plus bon* is possible in metalinguistic uses, as in (i).

   (i) En fait, il est plus bon que méchant.  
   in fact, he is more good than nasty  
   ‘In fact, he is more friendly rather than nasty.’ (Fuchs, 2014, p. 47)

6. *Que* can only head finite clauses when the clause shows inversion of the subject and the object (ii). For an account of this constraint in Generative Grammar, see Reglero (2006).

   (i) (Spanish)  
   María leyó más libros que Juan [*leyó revistas]  
   ‘Maria read more books than Juan.’

   (ii) María leyó más libros que revistas leyó Juan  
   María read more books than magazines read Juan  
   ‘Maria read more books than Juan read magazines.’

7. The article shows agreement with the head noun of the comparative phrase and is therefore called “relativo concordante” (‘agreeing relative’) in Spanish grammar. Its analysis is controversial. According to Sáez del Alamo (1999, p. 1133), the article cannot be analyzed as the pronominal antecedent of the relative pronoun, since it does not alternate with NPs or other types of pronouns (i). Hence, it should be analyzed as being part of the relative pronoun.

   (i) (Spanish)  
   *Compr-é más libros de los libros / tebeos que compra-ste tú  
   bought-1SG more books of the-pl. books / comics than bought-2SG you  
   ‘I bought more books / comics than you bought.’

   This analysis is supported by the fact that other types of pronouns require the standard marker *que* instead of *de*.

   (ii) (Spanish)  
   Juan comió menos plátanos que / *de esos que ves en esta cesta.  
   Juan ate less bananas than / of those that see,2SG in this basket  
   ‘Juan ate fewer bananas than you see in this basket.’

Nevertheless, it should be noted that *lo/la/los/las* can also combine with the standard marker *que*, but in this case the construction gives rise to an additive interpretation, rather than a comparative one. For instance, example (iii) means that, in addition to the books bought by Luis, Juan bought some more books (Brucart, 2003).

   (iii) (Spanish)  
   Juan compró más libros que los que vendía Luis  
   Juan bought more books than those that bought Luis  
   ‘Juan bought more books than Luis.’
8. Nevertheless, in Portuguese the pronominal element heading the relative may show agreement as in (i), but in this case the construction does not express a comparison, but has an additive interpretation (see Matos & Brito, 2008).

(i) (Portuguese)
    Ele comprou mais jornais de o / dos que nós compramos.
    he bought more newspapers of the.MSG / of.the.MPL that we bought
    ‘He bought more newspapers than we bought.’

9. In Romanian, de may also combine with cum (1), which is less grammaticalized (Pană Dindelegan, 2013).

(i) (Romanian)
    mai bine de cum credeam
    more well than how thought.1sg
    ‘better than I thought’

10. This may be due to the fact that in French, the possessive is a determiner and hence has a definiteness feature (cf. Schoorlemmer, 1998).

11. The compatibility of the superlative with other categories than adjectives argues against the attributive character of the superlative, put forward by Matushansky (2008). However, Matushansky (2008, p. 84) claims “that this impression is for the most part false, since the failures of definiteness marking and attributive marking in these positions occur in different environments in different languages”. For more details, see Matushansky (2008, pp. 70-84).

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