

A SUPERLATIVE COMPLEX IN APPALACHIAN ENGLISH
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Few areas of English grammar would seem less at issue than the meaning of superlative forms of English adjectives and adverbs.¹ Quirk et al. (1985:458-69) devote twelve pages to comparatives and superlatives in their *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, all of which are concerned with matters of structure only, suggesting that matters of semantics are self-evident. According to that and other descriptive grammars of the language, it is a given that most adjectives in English have both comparative and superlative forms, the exceptions being non-gradable absolutes like *dead, alone, asleep, previous*, and so on. The gradable/non-gradable distinction is by no means hard and fast, since non-gradables are occasionally used to express comparative degree (as in 'He was *more dead* than alive' and 'I couldn't have felt *more alone*'), in which cases they are interpreted as gradable, relative qualities (whether superlatives can be based on non-gradables as readily as comparatives seems less likely). For adjectives that are always gradable, there are two principal structural irregularities in their paradigms of comparison.

The first one concerns whether formation of the comparative and superlative degrees is achieved inflectionally by suffixation of *-er* and *-est* (these are the historic forms from Old English) or periphrastically by modification with *more* and *most*. The choice between the two processes today depends largely on the shape of the adjective, especially its length: The suffixes are used on monosyllabics almost always (exceptions include *real* and *wrong*; see Quirk et al. 1985:461), on disyllabics sometimes, and on words of three or more syllables very rarely. Some trisyllabics ending in *-y* can take a suffix (e.g. *unhappier, unluckiest*), and some monosyllabics take a modifier (e.g. *more fair, most true*), especially if the adjective is predicative. The *OED* suggests that modification with *more/most* showed first signs of arising toward

the end of the Old English period.² According to Curme, 'these analytic forms at first gained ground only slowly, not becoming common until the sixteenth century, then gradually establishing themselves in the literary language alongside of the terminational [forms], as we find them today' (1931:503). The current variation or competition between the two formation processes, which doubtless reflects change in progress, is evidenced by the fact that some adjectives may follow either one and by double comparisons (as historically in Shakespeare's '*most unkindest cut of all*' or today in untutored or unmonitored speech, as in 'I was *more healthier* back then than I am now.') Use of the suffix on adjectives of three or more syllables was long possible in the language, and it receded very gradually in literary English. In the late 19th century Thomas Carlyle was still writing *beautifulfuller* (according to *OED*, s.v. *-er*³), although quite self-consciously. As interesting as the comparison of the two formation processes might be, the subject must be set aside for another occasion; it can best be examined by utilizing historical corpora of the language.

The second structural irregularity is that a small handful of adjectives have historically suppletive forms for the comparative and superlative degrees. Some of these (as *better/best*, *worse/worst*, and *farther/farthest*—the last of these is more recent, developing in the Middle English period) maintain currency today. Others (as *late/latter/last* and *nigh/near/next*) are now opaque as comparatives and superlatives and have developed newer, regular paradigms from an older base (*late/later/latest*) or comparative form (*near/nearer/nearest*).

These two structural matters are covered in detail in Quirk et al. and other descriptive grammars. By contrast, the only discussions apparently to be found on the semantics of comparatives and especially of superlatives are in Jespersen's *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (1961) and in Webster's *Dictionary of English Usage* (Gilman 1989). They note certain idiomatic patterns that are widely used and, at least for native speakers, unambiguous. One, the 'absolute comparative' (as '*younger people*', which means simply 'young

people'), actually involves no comparison at all. Another is the 'superlative of two' (as 'the *strongest* of the two fighters', 'the *weakest* of my legs'), when logic would seem to dictate the comparative. A third is use of the superlative (either *most* or *-est*) as an intensifier, equivalent to *very* (as 'writers of the *ablest* kind' or 'Tom is a *most intelligent* boy'). Such usages are part of the common fabric of the language and involve no difficulty of interpretation. It is doubtful if there is variation of any consequence in their form or usage, and they are therefore of no interest here.

Descriptive grammars of English present gradable adjectives as always having both comparative and superlative forms, the choice of formation process, as outlined above, depending on the shape of the base word. These accounts rest on two assumptions: first, that an adjective having a superlative form normally has a comparative counterpart (an exception is the intensifying superlative cited above),³ and second, that the suffix *-est* occurs on gradable adjectives only. However, for Appalachian English (and probably American folk speech somewhat more generally), the summary accounts in descriptive grammars are in a number of ways inadequate and inaccurate. In Appalachia, for instance, both of the aforementioned assumptions can be shown to be false.

In Appalachian speech, forms having suffixal *-est* are sometimes based on present participles, as with *aggravatingest*, which would be rendered *most aggravating* in other varieties of the language. The difference would be paradigmatic, however, in that those varieties have the corresponding comparative *more aggravating*, while Appalachian speech does not have **aggravatinger*. The derivation of *aggravatingest* from *aggravating*, which I submit is unambiguously an adjective in function, is straightforward enough, as 'an *aggravating* child' ==> 'the *aggravatingest* child' or 'the *most aggravating* child'. But in Appalachia one also finds forms like *cheatingest* and *cussingest* (sentences 1-2), which are not so obviously based on adjectivals. Such 'superlatives' are equivalent not to **most cheating* and **most cussing*, but to *cheat the most* and *cuss the most*.⁴

1. That's the *cheatin'est* place here at the [Cherokee Indian Fair]. (Joseph S. Hall interview, Bryson City, NC, 1939)
2. Little Sam was the highest-tempered, and the *cussingest* young fellow in the whole neighborhood, and his mammy and pappy felt awful about it. (Vincent 1968:81)

Similar forms appear in 3-7:

3. Blalock was the *fightin'est* man in this neck of the woods. (Parris 1957:112)
4. Daddy said he was the gamest and *fightingest* little rascal he ever hunted. (Burnett 1960:134)
5. This was part of the story of Trim, the *huntin'est* coon dog in all the mountains—maybe in all the land—and of old Billy-B, the famous old hunter who put his dog above his son. (Parris 1957:171)
6. She is the *talkenest* woman I ever saw. (Edson and Fairchild 1895:374)
7. Ad said Barshia was the *thinkin'est* boy in the world. (Haun 1968:43)

Are these forms superlatives? The suffixes suggest so, though they have no corresponding comparative forms. Neither *fightinger*, *thinkinger*, etc. or *more fighting*, *more thinking*, etc. are attested, leaving *fight more* and *think more* as the only possible forms. The lack of comparatives in *-er* suggests that the present participles from which they are derived (*cheating*, *cussing*, *fighting*) are not gradable in a conventional sense. It might appear that Appalachian English has an additional derivational process that forms superlatives from verb phrases having *the most* as a complement, as in 8:

8. *fight the most* ==> *fightingest*

Reflection tells us that similar adjectives derived from verbs are

widely used in English as superlatives: *most interesting*, *most shocking*, *most disgusting*, and *most aggravating* are equivalent to 'interest the most', 'shock the most', 'disgust the most', 'aggravate the most', and so on. Such superlatives in general English are characterized by modification rather than by suffixation (in Appalachian English both types of superlatives are possible). However, while general English accepts '*most interesting*', it rejects '*most cheating*'. Why are sentences like 1-7 out of bounds, except in Appalachian English and related varieties, if general English forms superlatives from such present participles as *interesting*? Are these participles of different types? *Cheating*, *cussing*, and *fighting* are based on verbs with agentive human subjects, while *interesting*, *shocking*, and *disgusting* are not, the subjects of the latter being experiencers or patients rather than agents in terms of semantic case. That we simply have two different types of verbs based on the role of the subject is neither a complete or satisfactory explanation, however. In general English the form *winningest* is used frequently in a sentence like 'Cy Young is the *winningest* pitcher of all time.' We might say that in such a case it is Cy Young's team that scored the runs and won games for him, thus making him a patient, but this argument cannot be carried very far. Not only did Young undoubtedly play an agentive role of some kind in the victories he is credited with, but the superlative adjective is equally acceptable in application to a team ('The Braves are the *winningest* team in the nineties') and can also be applied to tennis players and golfers, who presumably are entirely responsible for their victories. It may be that *winningest* is an anomaly, a single form that has entered sports lingo without representing a productive process: The pitcher who saves the most games is not the **savingsest pitcher*, nor is the player who bats the most times called the **battingsest player*. An Appalachian speaker, however, could describe the coach who curses the most as the *cussingest* coach. A rule of some type in Appalachian English derives apparently superlative forms that are unacceptable in most other varieties of English.⁵

If we examine 'superlatives' based on present participles in Appalachian English, we discover something else quite intriguing. They

cannot always be paraphrased by VERB + *the most*. They may have one—or more—of three different, sometimes overlapping meanings. Sentences 9-14 reveal this complexity:

9. He's got a great helper in this field in Sam Queen of Maggie, *dancingest* man in all the land, who set them on their ear at New York's Waldorf-Astoria with his clogging. (Parris 1955:146)
10. He was the *singingest* man this side of Turnpike. (Soesbee 1993)
11. Peculiar adjectives are formed from verbs . . . 'She's the *workin'est* woman!' (Kephart 1913:285)
12. There are few words so characteristic as *beatin'est* and *workin'est*, which in politer society would be *strangest* and *most industrious*. (Walker 1939:2-3)
13. He had told somebody she was the *workingest* girl in the country. (Haun 1968:114)
14. Brad Green was a worker; Sara could see that, and even Mark exclaimed: "That's the *workinest* man in forty states." (Edwards 1963:51)

Dancingest in sentence 9 seems to be equivalent to *dances the best* or *dances extremely well* more readily than to *dance the most*. *Singingest* in 10 is paraphraseable as *sings the best* or *enjoys singing the most* at least as readily as *sings the most*. In Appalachia, to say that someone is the *workingest* person ever seen can mean that person works very long (*the most*), very hard (*the best*), or very well. Thus, there are three—at least three—possible interpretations of these forms, with subtle differences between them. So the matter appears to me, but rather than trusting my own judgment, I called on a team of consultants enlisted for the *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* (Montgomery and Hall forthcoming), people I have queried for years about mountain speech. All of them are natives, having 'come up' in the mountains, as they would say. To them I sent two sentences (15-16) and asked which of three interpretations (15a-c, 16a-c) each could have:

15. He's the *workingest* fellow I know.
- 15a. He works more than anyone else I've ever known.
- 15b. He works better than anyone else I've ever known.
- 15c. He enjoys working more than anyone else I've ever known.
16. He's the *singingest* fellow I know.
- 16a. He sings more than anyone else I've ever known.
- 16b. He sings better than anyone else I've ever known.
- 16c. He enjoys singing more than anyone else I've ever known.

Most consultants (six of nine in each case) responded that either 15 or 16 could have any (or all) of the three interpretations. The observation that the superlative has more than one possible meaning has not heretofore been made elsewhere, including by Cassidy and Hall's *Dictionary of American Regional English* (s.v. *-est* 1b), which cites a dozen superlatives derived from present participles, most from Appalachia, but gives no indication that their meaning may vary. With the discussion of sentences 15-16 in mind, we can return to an earlier question: Are these forms superlatives? Yes, in the sense that they are derived from VERB + *the most*, but for other senses this question is not so clearly answered. The multiplicity of functions which *-est* may encode suggests that the grammar of regional and social varieties of English may be opaque to speakers of other varieties in unexpected and complex ways. That is to say, it is not clear that outsiders to Appalachian English would interpret sentences 9-14 in more than one way. Whether they do or not, it IS clear that simple gradable adjectives are not the basis of these forms in Appalachian English.

A discussion of superlatives in Appalachian speech would be incomplete without noting additional features that differ from general English. First, the suffix *-est* is sometimes added to nouns (17-18) and past participles (19-20; *torn down* here means 'messy, unkempt, contemptible') functioning as adjectival compounds that also are non-gradable, adjectivals possibly derived in ways other than what we have already identified:⁶

17. It was the *hell-firedest* wreck I've ever seen. (Joseph S. Hall interview, Tobes Creek, TN, 1939)
18. A man may be the *hard-luckest* man in the county, or if he has a violent temper he might be the chair-flingin'est one. (Chalmers 1975:66)
19. Boys, that Thunderhead's the *torn-downdest* place I ever did see! (Kephart 1904-07)
20. That's the *torn-downest* house I ever seen. (Fink 1974:27)

Thus *hard-luckest* is equivalent to *has the hardest luck*. Second, the suffix *-est* may be added redundantly to adjectives, as in 21-22, as well as to at least one adjective already in the comparative (*upper*), in 23-25:

21. Who got there *firstest*? (Fink 1974:10)
22. What we called 'Sweetbread' she could make the *bestest* in all the country we thought. (Ogle 1986:44)
23. Turkey George Palmer was in the *upperest* house on Indian Creek. (Joseph S. Hall interview, Mt. Sterling, NC, 1956)
24. We lived in the *upperest* house on the cove. (Michael Montgomery interview with Herb Clabo, Gatlinburg, TN, 1994)
25. Now he had a boy named Mid, Uncle Aaron did, lived on the Middle Fork that built that *upperest* house up there. (Great Smoky Mountain National Park Oral History Program interview with Birgie Manning, 1981)

(The form *upperest* is less anomalous than it might appear, since it is parallel to the historic English form *uttermost*). Third, the suffix *-est* may be added to an adjective but remain equivalent to the absolute form of the word. An example that is fairly familiar is *onliest* (26-27), which *DARE* (Cassidy and Hall 1996) labels as 'chfly S[outh], S[outh] Mid[land]'. One less documented is *big*, whose superlative form in

Appalachian speech is sometimes paired with head nouns such as *half*, *majority*, *part*, or *portion* to mean simply 'most' or 'the majority', as in 28-31:

26. She's the *onliest* one I ever did know that could do such as that. (Goodrich 1931:63)
27. Hit's the *onliest* knife I've got. (Fink 1974:18)
28. The *biggest half* of the people does it. (Hayes 1944:34)
29. The *biggest majority* down there, they care, and there is some real good teachers. (Montgomery interview in White Pine, TN, 1978)
30. [The] *biggest part* of them was Democrats. It went Democratic, *biggest part* of the time. (Great Smoky Mountain National Park Oral History Program interview with Andy Cline, 1969)
31. [The] *biggest portion* of people didn't have lumber. (Great Smoky Mountain National Park Oral History Program interview with Winfred Cagle, 1973)

Interestingly, comparative forms such as *bigger majority* and *bigger part* are used in the same way in Appalachian English (32-33):

32. He rode a horse the *bigger part* of the time. (Great Smoky Mountain National Park Oral History Program interview with Clon Ownby, 1974)
33. They done the *bigger majority* of their logging on Laurel Creek. (McCracken 1974-75 interview with Earl Franklin)

This study has presented a variety of phenomena involving the forms and interpretations of the superlative degree of adjectives in Appalachian English that differ from the general English used in the United States. These phenomena are found in traditional Appalachian speech and admittedly occur infrequently in that variety. It remains an open question how widely attested forms like *singingest* are used and to what degree the processes discussed here continue to be

productive. They are typical of Appalachian English, but I do not claim that they are exclusive to that variety.

Though there is much we are still learning about superlatives in Appalachia, some conclusions and implications from the foregoing analysis are clear. If such a relatively small domain of grammar as the superlative of adjectives has remained significantly underdescribed, much work of documentation and description remains to be done for some varieties of the language. We have seen that some apparent superlatives encode more than one meaning simultaneously, indicating the complexity of grammars of regional varieties of English in that they do not have a one-to-one relation between form and meaning. If superlatives are used in ways that non-speakers of Appalachian English sometimes have difficulty interpreting, this fact suggests that grammars of regional varieties of American English may be significantly more divergent than we might expect from the textbook description we usually teach our students and find in our reference works. The opacity of forms like *talkigest* and *workingest* may lead to miscommunication, a point that can be illustrated with examples from many other areas of regional speech, especially from Appalachia. Two instances which the author has discussed elsewhere are 'punctual *whenever*' (sentences 34-35, in which the conjunction conveys the single occurrence of an action; Montgomery 1996) and 'alternative *one*' (sentences 36-37, in which the pronoun is postposed after conjoined elements and has the sense 'either one'; Montgomery 1998):

34. *Whenever* he died, he had a spot about the size of a quarter right on the end of that bone. (Joseph S. Hall interview, Smokemont, NC, 1939)
35. What did they do with you *whenever* you killed that man, some two or three year ago? (McCracken 1974-75 interview with Earl Franklin)
36. She says, 'I'm going home [and] see Emerts Cove or hell *one* before daylight.' Now, that's what she said. (Joseph S. Hall interview, Copeland Creek, TN, 1939)

37. [Boneset is] bitterer than quinine and hit'll kill ye or cure ye, *one*. (Joseph S. Hall interview, Bradley Fork, NC, 1939)

Such features have been termed 'camouflaged' by Arthur Spears, as being 'phonologically similar or identical to forms in the base language . . . but which are used with different semantic values' (1983:850). Because native speakers are usually unaware of this discrepancy and the potential for miscommunication, these features often remain unrecognized until a serious breakdown in understanding occurs.

Another implication of this paper concerns the categorization of *-est*, usually considered an inflectional suffix. Because it occurs on a wider range of forms in Appalachian speech, we could argue that it apparently has even greater predictability and is even more unambiguously an inflection. Since the constraints on its occurrence are unknown, however, it may be premature to make this inference. On the other hand, the status of *-est* as a derivational morpheme is suggested by the fact that the suffix may have one meaning or another. Whichever status we assign to *-est* in forms like *workingest* (this is a topic deserving thorough consideration elsewhere), the *-ing* on the verb (usually considered the present-participle inflection) must be seen as a derivational suffix. In short, *-est* cannot be seen as the same type of morpheme in Appalachian English that it is in general English. These points are also ones that have heretofore not been made in grammatical descriptions of the English language.

NOTES

1. This paper deals primarily with adjectives, but much of what is said applies also to adverbs. It is based on a section from a work in progress, a descriptive grammar of Appalachian English. The examples used are drawn from the *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* (Montgomery and Hall forthcoming). I am indebted to Tom Nunnally and Ralf Thiede, whose suggestions have made this paper stronger and more cohesive, and to anonymous reviewers for

- their helpful comments, but remain responsible for all statements and interpretations in this paper.
2. It should be remembered that the *OED* did not pursue a full-scale reading program for Old English, but sought pre-1000 citations only to supplement items attested later. Thus, earliest dates from the Old English period are only suggestive.
 3. Although the point is not germane to this paper, authorities also usually presume that any adjective having a comparative form has a superlative one. One exception to this point, the absolute comparative ('*younger* people', which does not have a corresponding form '*youngest* people'), has already been cited. Quirk et al. note that statements about health (as 'He is *better/worse*') also have no corresponding superlative.
 4. The citations in this paper come from both oral and written sources. When taken from the latter, the spelling of the original is maintained. This fact accounts for variation in spelling of the final <ng> in sentences 1-7 and 9-14; the variety of English represented here has categorical final [n] in words in which there is variation.
 5. The line between the two is, however, not as clear as suggested. Tom Nunnally and Ralf Thiede, neither an Appalachian speaker, suggest that both of the following are acceptable in general English: She has the *bitingest* wit in the department.
She also has the *winningest* smile around.
The constraint that permits these forms but rules out *savingest* may again involve whether or not the subject is a human agent.
 6. Ralf Thiede (p.c.) suggests to me that in Appalachian English *-est* represents an affix that 'occurs after an aspect morpheme that is derivational—progressive-derivational *-ing* or perfective-derivational *-ed/-en*', and that the only exception to this general rule is *hard-luckest* in sentence 18, which might be a reduced form of *hard-luckedest*. This elegant formulation has much to recommend it. While it accounts for why *thinking* may take *-est* in Appalachian English, it does not explain the fact that the same adjective cannot take modification by *most* in other varieties.

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PRONOMINAL CLITIC STRESS IN RIO DE LA PLATA SPANISH: AN OPTIMALITY ACCOUNT¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Spanish, pronominal clitics are sometimes attached before the verb (proclitics) and sometimes after it (enclitics), depending on the tense and mood features of the verb. Although one of the traditionally accepted features of clitics is their parasitical phonological nature and their inherent lack of stress (Berendsen 1986:23), it has been pointed out that it is possible to distinguish languages where clitics are always unstressable from those where they may bear stress, and those where clitics can affect the stress pattern of the host word from those where they cannot (Klavans 1995:129). The stressability of clitics in Romance is well documented (see Klavans (1995:157) for Old Spanish, Dalbor (1980:231) and Harris (1989b:359) for Modern Spanish, Monachesi (1996) and Peperkamp (1996) for Neapolitan, Italian and Lucanian).

In Río de la Plata Spanish, pronominal clitics have the following stress properties: pronominal proclitics are unstressable, polysyllabic enclitic pronominals may be stressed (but need not be), and monosyllabic enclitic pronominals may be stressed, provided that the verb they are attached to is not stressed on the ultima. When stressed, the enclitic group² is always oxytonic, i.e. stressed on the last syllable.

Not all accounts of Spanish clitics have noted their stressability. In early generative accounts of Spanish phonology (Cressey 1978:119), four stress patterns are described for surface forms in Spanish, i.e. final, penultimate, antepenultimate syllable, and fourth from the end. The last group includes only verbs with their enclitics, and as a result, Cressey feels justified in eliminating them from the description because of the word boundaries present (he assumes #dando#se#lo (#giving#him/her#it)), and the fact that 'clitic pronouns . . . are incapable of being stressed' (Cressey 1978:97). Klavans (1995), while apparently tacitly accepting that in Modern Spanish clitics are unable to accept stress,