

The Use of the Superlative Degree for the Comparative

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I

The following is an attempt to clarify a few points in regards to the superlative used for the comparative, by consulting the views of grammarians in dealing with such usage, and to try to form my own point of view in an actual teaching situation.

View of grammarians concerning the use of the superlative degree for the comparative.

1) From *Otto Jespersen, A Modern English Grammar*

The comparative was originally used when two were compared, the superlative when more than two were referred to. Thus, in what is still considered the more dignified or literary usage :

“If Hercules and Lychas Plaie at dice Which is the *better* man, the *greater* throw May turne by fortune from the *weaker* hand.” (Shakespeare ; *Merch.*)

“..... two sons of which I was the *younger*.” (Fielding ; *Tom Jones.*)

“I hardly know which was the *better* pleased, Traddles or I.”

(Charles Dickens ; *David Copperfield.*)

“Caesar, Rome of Peter, which was *crueller* ? which was *worse* ?”

(Tennyson)

But apart from such set phrases as the *lower lip*, the *upper end*, the *lower* (and upper) *classes*, the natural tendency in colloquial speech is to use the superlative in speaking of two, and this is found very frequently in good authors.

Examples are :

“Whose blood is *reddest*, his or mine.” (Shakespeare ; *Merch.*)

“Whose God is *strongest*, thine or mine.” (Milton ; *Samson Agonistes.*)

“We’ll see which is *strongest*, you or I.” (Goldsmith.)

“..... the guest and the entertainer although the former had probably fasted *longest*.” (Scott ; *Ivanhoe.*)

“She was the *youngest* of the two daughters.” (Austen ; *Emma.*)

“..... being of two evils by very much the *least*.”

(De Quincey ; *Confessions of an Opium Eater.*)

2) John Leslie Hall in *English Usage* states that the rhetorical scholars are very strict on this point, and that A. S. Hill, Genung, Herrick and Damon are all against using the superlative for two. The grammarians seem less rigid.

Whitney in *Essentials of English Grammar* says, “Both in ordinary talk and in literature, it is very common to speak of one of two things as being the *longest*, although to say the *longer* is more accurate and more approved.”

Carpenter in *Principles of English Grammar* says, “..... seems to be almost invariably due to carelessness, but it is so common both in colloquial and literary English, and so natural that it must usually be regarded as an innocent error.”

W. J. Rolfe in his notes to Merchant of Venice defends this use of the superlative and says, “It is good old English though condemned by most modern grammars.”

Bain in *Higher English Grammar* says that the comparative as in *the larger of the two*, is a useless encumbrance in the language.

J. S. Hall, after citing such grammarians, concludes his argument by saying, “Polite conversation teems with this locution ; in fact, only the most careful confine themselves to the other. Indeed, it would seem that the comparative degree is on the road to extinction except before ‘than’.”

3) In *Leonard’s Current English Usage*, we find the information on this topic, in regards to a specific sentence.

“Of two desputants, the *warmest* is generally in the wrong.”

(Lamb ; *Popular Fallacies.*)

Leonard has listed the comments of linguists as follows ;

“Illiterate.”

“The use of the superlative of two, I find quite generally in the conversation of British novels. Evidently in England, the rhetoricians haven’t been able to frighten people into avoiding it.”

“Ordinary colloquial use of superlative.”

From such widely varied comments, we come to Leonard’s own comment :

“Apparently Lamb’s (and other authors) use of expressions similar to this has not rendered it entirely acceptable. The editors are almost unanimous in condemning it; the other groups of judges, while not so severe as the editors, give a majority for classing the expression as uncultivated, though many approve it as colloquial, and there is even a scattering of votes for its approval as literary English.”

4) From *Porter G. Perrin, An Index to English.*

In colloquial and familiar English, a superlative is often a form of emphasis. “We saw the *loveliest* flower when we visited her garden,” “Hasn’t she the *sweetest* voice?” This often leads to statements like “His new novel is the *best* of the two,” in which the best is really an emphatic word for better. These expressions are usually out of place except in familiar writing.

However, in Perrin’s survey, we find that he does not cite evidence.

5) *George Campbell, The Philosophy of Rhetoric.*

“..... both degrees are in such cases used indiscriminately. We say rightly either “This is the weaker of the two,” or “This is the weakest of the two.” If however, we may form a judgment from the most general principles of analogy, the former is preferable, because there are only two things compared.”

6) *Poutsma, A Grammar of Late Modern English.*

When two persons or things are compared, the comparative is preferred to the superlative by careful speakers and writers. But the superlative is mostly used in ordinary spoken English. The latter is, perhaps, sometimes preferred as the stronger form.

7) *Russell Thomas, The use of the Superlative Degree for the Comparative*

(*The English Journal*, Dec., 1935.)

Russell Thomas has, in this study, gathered a good number of quotations dating from as far back as the twelfth century, and has listed his examples as to enable us to see that (1) the superlative degree is used more frequently with certain words than with others, (2) the habit of using the superlative degree for the comparative is not confined to any particular level of usage, either spoken or written.

He says, "When I began to examine the quotations which I had gathered, I found that what Jespersen had stated was borne out by my own investigation. Poutsma's comments with reference to spoken English, I also found to be correct, but I began to doubt, and still do, the validity of his statement that the comparative is preferred to the superlative by careful speakers and writers." For the use of *best*, Thomas has cited examples from the 12th century down to his day.

12th century. *Early English Homelies*, (ed. Warner. EETS.)

Maria geceas Jone seleste dael,.....

Mary hath chosen the *best* part,.....

1791. *Boswell, Life of Johnson.*

Boswell speaking: "I have acted in the same manner with regard to my own two sons; having placed the eldest at Eaton and the second at Westminster. I cannot say which is *best*."

1934. Broadcaster of the Forest Hills tennis match between two contestants.

May the *best* lady win.

Broadcaster of 1934 World's Series.

Tommy Bridges was easily the *best* man.

Examples cited for *last*.

1667. *John Milton, Paradise Lost.*

In Mercy and Justice both,

Through Heav'n and Earth, so shall glory excell.

But Mercy first and *last* shall brightest shine.

1912. *Logan Pearsall Smith, The English Language.*

The *last*, however, is the most interesting and certainly the most important

aspect of the subject. (two aspects taken into consideration.)

Examples cited for *most*.

1588. *Robert Greene, Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay.*

Miles ; to know whether the feminine or masculine gender be *most* worthy.

1934. *The Sponger by A. G. Strong in the Fortnightly.*

The really successful spongers I have known have belonged to one of two types The first type, though they're often the *most* successful, are not true spongers at all.

After making this survey, Russell Thomas concludes that the rule which governs comparison needs to be revised. He says, "I believe that the examples which I have collected constitute sufficient evidence upon which to formulate a revision of the rule governing comparison as it is usually stated. I should say that with respect to the word *best*, whether adjective or adverb, it is permissible to use the superlative when two objects or ideas are compared, both in speech and in the written word. If the writer or speaker wishes to use *better*, there is nothing to prevent such usage. As a matter of fact the comparative is here to stay, for I have yet to find a single example, where the superlative of any word is followed by *than*. The whole point of my argument is simply this: When we find that a certain construction has been present in a language from the earliest written records down to the present day, we had better stop to discover, if possible, why such a construction has persisted. The remarks just made apply also to *las*, and *most*."

8) *Fries, American English Grammar.*

Ever since the eighteenth century there has been considerable discussion concerning the use of the inflections for the comparative and superlative degrees in accord with the number of objects referred to. The use of the comparative form where two are concerned seems to reflect the old distinction between a dual and a plural number which was set off by many clear forms in the older stages of the Indo-European Languages. In English the old dual forms disappeared early, and our plural number means *more than one*, not *more than two*.

In the materials examined here, the usage of the adjective is overwhelmingly against the distinction of the dual by means of the comparative. In the Standard English letters, the comparative is used only once in such a situation.

“My husband left me with two children ; the *younger* is twelve yeares old.”

Typical examples of the superlative form in this use ;

“the *surest* and *most* economical method; (two ways are indicated.)

“This is the *best* answer to give.” (two answers proposed.)

“I am asking that you grant my *oldest* son a discharge ; both my boys are in

In the Vulgar English letters, no example of the comparative degree inflection appeared as a dual distinct from a plural. Typical examples of the superlative for two are :

“I have two children my *oldest* boy is seventeen years of age.”

“He is my *youngest* boy.” (two sons indicated.)

The use of the superlative rather than the comparative for two, thus ignoring a dual as distinct from a plural, is a fact of Standard English Usage, and not a characteristic limited to Vulgar English.

II

As we have seen, the views of the rhetoricians and grammarians cited here, are greatly varied and divided. There are the rhetoricians who are rigidly against using the superlative when two things are compared, Some grammarians recognize both the use of the comparative and the superlative, but speak of the former as being more accurate and more approved and preferable when two things are compared. Leonard says, “..... may be used as colloquial but uncultivated.” And Poutsma, “When two things are compared, the comparative is preferred to the superlative by careful speakers and writers. But the superlative is mostly used in ordinary spoken English.” But we find that Poutsma does not present a sufficient survey of actual usage when speaking of the comparative as preferred to the superlative by careful speakers and writers. On the other hand,

there are Thomas and Fries. Russell Thomas sees a need for a revision in the rules governing comparison and states that with respect to the words *best*, *last* and *most*, it is permissible to use the superlative when two objects or ideas are compared, both in speech and in the written word. He adds, however, that if the speaker wishes to use the comparative, there is nothing to prevent such usage. Fries concludes that the use of the superlative rather than the comparative for two is a fact of Standard English usage and not a characteristic limited to Vulgar English.

In dealing with, and in trying to form one's own view from such evidence as is presented here, a careful distinction should be made between opinions about correctness and reports of actual usage. From the evidence gathered there seems to be little to justify that the comparative was originally used when two persons, things or ideas were compared, and the superlative when more than two things were referred to. We see that W. J. Rolfe says, and rightly it would seem from the quotations examined, that it is good old English though condemned by most modern grammars. Again, it is obvious that the use of the superlative for the comparative is very common both in colloquial and literary English. It seems to be so common that Hall goes as far as to say that the comparative degree of adjectives is on the road to extinction except before *than*.

As an aid to clarify my own opinion of this problem from a teaching point of view, I should like to classify the foregoing opinions roughly into four.

- (1) The superlative is not permissible in written or colloquial language.
- (2) The superlative is permissible in colloquial speech but not in written language.
- (3) The superlative is sometimes permissible with certain words in written and spoken language.
- (4) The superlative exists as well as the comparative and is equally permissible.

In an actual teaching situation, I am inclined to choose the last view, for if we are trying to develop a command of the language comparable to that of a native speaker, we must reflect what native speakers actually do. It seems that modern methods insist upon conversational control first and pattern practices must

therefore reflect what actually occurs in this situation. To insist upon the dual comparative alone, even at the beginning stage, and to teach the comparative as *the* correct form, condemning the use of the superlative as illiterate, would be, to mislead the student. I wonder if there are not many situations where the comparative might seem artificial and forced to the native speaker. At any rate, the frequency of the superlative in actual usage, to show a high degree even where two are compared, cannot be overlooked.