

CHAPTER 27

Special and Irregular Comparison of Adjectives

The title of this chapter says it all : some adjectives in Latin form their comparative and superlative degrees irregularly. But don't panic.

The irregularities are entirely limited either to the stem of the adjective uses in the comparative and superlative degrees, or to the way the comparative or superlative endings are attached to the stem.

The irregularities do not affect the way the adjectives decline in the comparative or superlative degrees.

You already have experience with irregular comparison in lots of English adjectives :

| | | |
|-------------|---------|----------|
| good | better | best |
| bad | worse | worst |
| little | smaller | smallest |
| much (many) | more | most |

If you take a close look at the degrees of these adjectives you can see that for all of them the stem is changed from the positive to the comparative and superlative degrees. It's not "good, gooder, goodest", because English substitutes another stem in place of the one you would expect if you were thoughtlessly following the rules that apply to the regular adjectives. Now look more closely. Even though the stems have changed, you can still often see the regular comparative and superlative endings "-er" and "-est" attached to the irregular stem.

ADJECTIVES WITH IRREGULAR STEMS

The positive degree of the adjective meaning "good" is "*bonus, -a, -um*", a first and second declension adjective.

To form the comparative degree, you use another stem, "*mel-*", to which you add the comparative adjectival ending "*-ior, -ius*".

Review the comparative endings "*-ior, -ius*" from Chapter 26 if you have to and decline the adjective "*melior, -ius*".

| | MASCULINE AND FEMININE | NEUTER |
|------|------------------------|--------|
| N/V. | _____ | _____ |
| Gen. | _____ | _____ |
| Dat. | _____ | _____ |
| Acc. | _____ | _____ |
| Abl. | _____ | _____ |
| N/V. | _____ | _____ |
| Gen. | _____ | _____ |
| Dat. | _____ | _____ |
| Acc. | _____ | _____ |
| Abl. | _____ | _____ |

There was really no reason for you to decline this adjective. It follows precisely the same pattern as the regular comparative degree. I just want you to believe that the irregular comparative degree isn't completely irregular : its irregularity is limited to the stem it uses and does not affect its declension at all.

Perhaps you have some bad feelings already about all the new forms you're going to have to memorize. There's no escaping the hard fact that you will have to memorize three forms for irregular adjectives, but there's a way to ameliorate the problem. These irregular stems often are the roots are English words, so if you learn the English derivatives, it will much easier to fix the irregular stems in your memory. For example, from the stem "*mel-*" we get the English verb "ameliorate", which means "to make better, improve".

Let's move on now to the superlative degree of the adjective "*bonus, -a, -um*": it's "*optimus, -a, -um*". Obviously we get the English words "optimist", "optimal", "optimum", and others from this stem, but notice that the superlative degree simply uses the "*-us, -a, -um*" endings without the "*-issim-*" infix which the regular adjectives use. You'll have no problem adjusting to this. Here are some more irregular adjectives with a few comments.

| POSITIVE | COMPARATIVE | SUPERLATIVE |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>magnus, -a, -um</i> (great) | <i>maior, maius</i> (greater) | <i>maximus, -a, -um</i> (greatest) |

The comparative degree "*maior*" will look more familiar if you add a tail to the intervocalic "*-i-*": "major". (A Major is greater than a Captain.) Remember, now, that even though it looks a little odd, "*maior*" will decline quite normally: *maioris, maiori*, etc., with "*ma-*" as the stem.

| POSITIVE | COMPARATIVE | SUPERLATIVE |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>malus, -a, -um</i> (bad) | <i>peior, peius</i> (worse) | <i>pessimus, -a, -um</i> (worst) |

Use the same trick with the intervocalic "*-i-*" in "*peior*". "Pejorative" means "derogatory, disparaging", from the Latin sense of "worse".

| POSITIVE | COMPARATIVE | SUPERLATIVE |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>parvus, -a, -um</i> (small) | <i>minor, minus</i> (smaller) | <i>minimus, -a, -um</i> (smallest) |

The comparative degree looks odd : the adjectival ending "*-ior, -ius*" seems to be missing. It's there; only the "*-i-*" is missing.

You decline "minor, minus" as you normally would, but just leave the "*-i-*" off. Try it :

| | MASCULINE AND FEMININE | NEUTER |
|------|------------------------|--------|
| N/V. | _____ | _____ |
| Gen. | _____ | _____ |
| Dat. | _____ | _____ |
| Acc. | _____ | _____ |
| Abl. | _____ | _____ |
| N/V. | _____ | _____ |
| Gen. | _____ | _____ |
| Dat. | _____ | _____ |
| Acc. | _____ | _____ |
| Abl. | _____ | _____ |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| POSITIVE <i>superus, -a, -um</i> (above) | COMPARATIVE <i>superior, -ius</i> (higher) | SUPERLATIVE <i>supremus, -a, -um</i> (last) <i>summus, -a, -um</i> (highest) |
|--|--|--|

The only peculiarity of this adjective are the two superlative degrees which are derived from it.

"*Summus*" means "highest", and so does "*supremus*", but "*supremus*" can also mean "last".

Think of it this way. We're stand at the bottom of a long ladder that's extending upward. The object which is the highest on the ladder is the "last" we would reach as we ascend.

So Latin can say "*supremo die*" (on the last day).

The point is, both "*summus*" and "*supremus*" can mean "highest", but "*supremus*" often can have the extended meaning "last".

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| POSITIVE <i>(pro, prae)</i> (before) | COMPARATIVE <i>prior, -ius</i> (prior, previous) | SUPERLATIVE <i>primus, -a, -um</i> (first) |
|--|--|--|

The adjectives "*prior*" and "*primus*" are comparative and superlative degrees of an adjective that doesn't exist in the positive degree.

"*Pro*" and "*prae*" are prepositions, not adjectives, and they can mean "before".

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| POSITIVE <i>multus, -a, -um</i> (much; many) | COMPARATIVE <i>plus, pluris (n)</i> <i>plures, plura</i> (more) | SUPERLATIVE <i>plurimus, -a, -um</i> (very many; most) |
|--|--|--|

The chief difficulty with this adjective, as you can see, comes in the comparative degree.

In the singular of the comparative, the adjective "*multus*" becomes a neuter noun "*plus, pluris (n)*".

It isn't an adjective at all. It's a noun which means "more".

Latin uses it with a genitive case of the noun : "*plus pecuniae*" (more of money).

Like this :

| | | | |
|------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| N/V. | <i>plus</i> | <i>pecuniae</i> | (more money) |
| Gen. | <i>pluris</i> | <i>pecuniae</i> | (of more money) |
| Dat. | ----- | ----- | |
| Acc. | <i>plus</i> | <i>pecuniae</i> | (more money) |
| Abl. | <i>plure</i> | <i>pecuniae</i> | (by/with more money) |

In the plural, however, the word for "more" becomes an adjective, and declines just as you would expect a normal third declension adjective to decline. One set of forms for the masculine and feminine, and one for the neuter :

| | | |
|------|------------------------|-----------------|
| | MASCULINE AND FEMININE | NEUTER |
| N/V. | <i>plures</i> | <i>plura</i> |
| Gen. | <i>plurium</i> | <i>plurium</i> |
| Dat. | <i>pluribus</i> | <i>pluribus</i> |
| Acc. | <i>plures</i> | <i>plura</i> |
| Abl. | <i>pluribus</i> | <i>pluribus</i> |

There is a distinction to be maintained between "*plus, pluris (n)*" and "*plures, plura*".

The adjective "*multus, -a, -um*" means "much" or "many", and these two words, "much" and "many" are not interchangeable in English. We use the adjective "much" when we're talking about something which can't be counted up individually; we use "many" when it can. For example, we say "much mud", or "much money". It would sound odd to say "many muds" or "many moneys". We could possibly say "many muds" if we're mudologists and we're talking about many different kinds of muds around the world: Chinese mud, Korean food, French mud, and so on. In this case the mud types would in fact be countable, and the adjective "many" would be appropriate : "There are many muds in the world today.

Some tan, some yellowish, and others which are completely black". Conversely, we wouldn't say "much towels", "much rivers", or "much people", because these are objects which are countable. Latin uses the singular neuter noun "*plus, pluris*" when referring to uncountable objects, and the adjective "*plures, plura*" when referring to countable objects. "*Plus aeris*" (more [of] bronze), and "*plures homines*" (many people).

SUPERLATIVE DEGREE OF ADJECTIVES IN -R

To form the degrees of regular adjectives, you simply add "*-ior, -ius*" or "*-issimus, -a, -um*" to the stem of the adjective.

The stem, you remember, is the form you see in all the forms of the adjective except for the masculine nominative singular.

When the adjective ends in "*-r*" in the nominative masculine singular, however, the superlative degree does something slightly different.

These rules hold true for all adjectives which end in "*-r*", not just for a chosen few.

Let's look at a couple of examples :

pulcher, -chra, -chrum
liber, -a, -um
acer, acris, acre
celer, celeris, celere

The comparative degree of these adjectives is quite regular.

You simply use the stem with the comparative suffix "*-ior, -ius*" attached.

| POSITIVE | COMPARATIVE |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>pulcher, -chra, -chrum</i> | _____ |
| <i>liber, -a, -um</i> | _____ |
| <i>acer, acris, acre</i> | _____ |
| <i>celer, celeris, celere</i> | _____ |

But to form the superlative degree of these adjectives you do two things :

(1) use the masculine nominative singular as the stem, and

(2) add the suffix "*-rimus, -a, -um*".

Thus, according to step (1), even if the true stem of the adjective lacks the "*-e-*" before the "*-r*", you build the superlative degree from a base ending in "*-er*".

Adding the suffix "*-rimus, -a, -um*", you end up with a doubled "*r*".

So for the adjective "*piger, -a, -um*" (slow), the superlative degree is "*pigerrimus, -a, -um*"

Now write out the superlative degree of these adjectives.

| POSITIVE | SUPERLATIVE |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>pulcher, -chra, -chrum</i> | _____ |
| <i>liber, -a, -um</i> | _____ |
| <i>acer, acris, acre</i> | _____ |
| <i>celer, celeris, celere</i> | _____ |

SOME ADJECTIVES ENDING IN -LIS

There are six adjectives in Latin ending in "*-lis, -e*" which have a oddity in the formation of the superlative degree. Wheelock concentrates on only three.

The irregularity of these adjectives is that the suffix "*-limus, -a, -um*" is used in place of "*-issimus -a, -um*".

The comparative degree, however, is entirely regular.

Form the degrees of the three adjectives which use this irregular suffix in the superlative, then compare them to three other adjectives in "*-lis, -e*" which use the regular superlative suffix.

(Remember, this irregularity is limited to only six adjectives ending in "-lis, -e". All other adjectives ending in "-lis, -e" form their comparisons regularly.)

| | POSITIVE | COMPARATIVE | SUPERLATIVE |
|--------------|------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Irregular | | | |
| | <i>facilis, -e</i> | _____ | _____ |
| | <i>similis, -e</i> | _____ | _____ |
| | <i>difficilis, -e</i> | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Regular | | | |
| | <i>mollis, -e</i> (soft) | _____ | _____ |
| | <i>mortalis, -e</i> (mortal) | _____ | _____ |
| | <i>fidelis, -e</i> (loyal) | _____ | _____ |

VOCABULARY PUZZLES

appello (1) This verb in the passive voice is a copulative verb, linking the subject to a predicate nominative. "He is called Brutus" would be "*Appellatur Brutus*", not "*Brutum*".

maiores, -ium (m) Obviously this noun is derived from the comparative adjective for "*magnus, -a, -um*". Used as a noun in the plural, it means "the greater in age" or the "ancestors".

similis, -e It takes the dative case as its complement.
"*Hoc non simile illi*" (This is not similar to that.)

01/10/93