

Chapter 27: Irregular Comparison

Chapter 27 covers the following: the formation of irregular comparative and superlative forms, for instance, *bonus/melior/optimus* (“good/better/best”); and at the end of the lesson we’ll review the vocabulary which you should memorize in this chapter.

There are two important rules to remember in this chapter: (1) There are six third-declension adjectives with irregular superlatives. Their positive forms end *-lis* in the masculine/feminine nominative singular, and their superlatives end *-limus*, for example, *facillimus*. (2) All adjectives of any declension which have nominative singular masculine forms ending *-er* — for example, *liber* — form superlatives which end *-rimus*, such as *liberrimus*.

This chapter, the last before we take the first test in this class, is basically an exercise in memorization. There are no new grammatical concepts introduced here. Most Indo-European languages incorporate some way of elevating the degree of adjectives, and I don’t know of one where at least a few of those forms aren’t irregular. Remember: irregularity is a sign they’re being used a lot. A little linguistics may help make some sense out of the irregularities certain Latin comparative forms exhibit, but it can’t take you all the way. You’re going to have to do some memorizing. [Better than a big new concept like participles right before the test, huh? “Better”! Notice that? Irregular comparative in English. Why don’t we say “gooder”? Sounds “gooder” to me than better, except every time I said it my teacher sent me to stand in the corner. How cruel we are to our children! Speaking of which,...]

Here are the easiest of the forms associated with irregular adjective comparison in Latin: six superlative forms, all third-declension, which use *-limus* in place of *-issimus*. Their positive forms all end *-lis*, *-le*, for instance, *facilis*, *facile* (“easy”), the superlative of which is *facillimus*. Its negative *difficilis* (“difficult”) has a superlative *difficillimus*, and *similis* (“like” as in “alike”) has a superlative *simillimus*. To these could be added the negative of *similis*, *dissimilis* and its superlative *dissimillimus*, along with *gracillimus* (*gracilis*) and *humillimus* (*humilis*). Wheelock includes these in footnote 1, page 127, but since they’re not on the vocabulary list for this (or any) chapter in Wheelock, you’re not required to know them. Small blessings are gooder than none.

There is another type of irregular superlative, adjectives whose nominative singular masculine forms end in *-er*. This includes adjectives of any declension, such as *liber* and *pulcher* (1/2), and *acer* (3). Their superlatives also omit the usual *-iss-* and double the final consonant of the base, producing *-rimus*, *-a*, *-um*, as in *liberrimus*, *pulcherrimus*, *acerrimus*. Originally, the ending was *-simus*, but *-l-* + *-s-* in Latin assimilated to *-ll-*; thus, **facil-simus* became *facillimus*. Likewise, *-r-* + *-s-* in Latin assimilated to *-rr-*; thus, **acer-simus* became *acerrimus*. I mention this because it may help make sense of another form we’ll encounter in a moment, *maximus* (“greatest”) which is really *mag-* + *-simus*, where *-gs-* became *-x-*.

All of that is fairly easy, isn’t it? Say yes. Well, you will after you see the irregular comparisons we’re about to confront, which are way more irregular than that. [Now here I get why people don’t say “irregularer” which is definitely not “gooder” than “more irregular.”] And there are various reasons why these irregular comparisons looming ahead present the greater challenge

here. First, because of phonology (the way words are pronounced), sounds inside these irregular forms blend together more often, e.g. *mag-* + *-ior* produces *maior* (the /g/ sound drops out). Also, in general, irregular comparison more often involves composite forms where different bases have conflated into one system. That is, the positive comes from one word root but the comparative and superlative come from another. A good example is English “better, best” which come from the root **bot* meaning “compensation.” By another linguistic path this root gives us our word “booty,” like pirate booty. Booty is a “good” thing, especially to a pirate.

Unfortunately, not all irregular comparison can be explained away so easily. For instance, the Latin comparative for “good,” *melior* which is just as irregular as our “better,” simply cannot be traced or explained linguistically. Nor can its opposite *peius* (“worse”), the comparative for “bad,” or its close relative *pessimus* (“worst”). All we can say here is things have gone from badder to baddest.

So let’s chart them, the seven severely, in some cases inexplicably, irregular comparative and superlative forms in Latin, bearing in mind that their irregularity is a byproduct of their frequent use. First up, *bonus* (“good”), whose comparative is *melior*, *melius* (“better”) as we just noted, “of unknown origin,” to quote the dictionary. Its superlative is *optimus* (“best”), which is probably a compound of the prefix *ob-* (“against, face to face, up in front of something”) and the superlative suffix *-simus* (in the form *-timus* here), meaning that the original sense of *optimus* was “front-est.” The “best” things often do stand out.

Magnus (“large, great”) has a comparative *maior*, *maius* (“greater”), a combination of *mag-* (“big,” cf. *magnus*) and the comparative ending *-ior*. Its superlative *maximus* (“greatest”), as we noted before, was originally *mag-* + *-simus*, which is close to predictable if you’re following the linguistics here.

Malus (“bad”) has a comparative *peior*, *peius* (“worse”) and a superlative *pessimus* (“worst”). Their *-ior/-ius* and *-simus* endings are no surprise, but the etymology of the *pe-* base seen in both is unclear.

The comparative of *multus* (“much, many”) looks wildly irregular, *plus*. It’s built on the same base, *ple-* (“fill, full”), that gives us our Latin derivative “plenty,” so it uses a totally different root from *multus*, making it a classic example of composite comparison, two linguistic swatches quilted together into one fabric. But that’s only one of the issues here. *Plus* is not an adjective — which is kind of unusual for a comparative adjective — it’s a noun, a third-declension neuter noun! It means “more” like “I want more.” That’s in the singular. In the plural, it goes back to being what it should be, an adjective, like “I want more adjectives that are actually adjectives.” Note: no masculine or feminine forms in the singular. Nouns don’t change gender (normally). It’s just *plus*, *pluris* — no dative is attested in ancient texts so we can’t just assume it was *pluri* which is what the dative ought to be — *plus* [don’t forget! neuter nominatives and accusatives are always the same], and *plure* [not *i*-stem, at least not in the singular].

So how do you say “more (something),” e.g. more money, more wisdom, more money? You use a genitive, technically a “partitive genitive” — more about that in a later chapter — for instance, *plus virtutis*, “more (literally, of) courage.” Then, as we just said, the plural goes back to being

what it should be, an adjective — *plures, plura; plurium; pluribus; plures, plura; pluribus* — and third-declension. So, just as you'd expect for a comparative adjective which are all third-declension and *i*-stem, its genitive plural is *plurium*. Why its neuter nominative/accusative plural isn't *pluria* ... no idea. But it isn't. It's *plura*. All I can say is memorize it.

Back to the main chart, and the superlative of *multus, plurimus* ("most"). It's an adjective throughout its declension — hallelujah! — and it has the by-now familiar *-imus* ending we've seen in a raft of *-simus* and *-timus* superlative forms, which makes it seem almost regular, at least by comparison to its comparative. *Plurimus* is actually all but predictable if you understand that it's really *plus-* + *-imus* which changed in Latin to *plurimus* through a process we mentioned before, rhotacism ("r-ing") where a single *-s-* in between vowels changes to *-r-*. And this is not the last time we'll run into rhotacism.

Parvus ("small") has a comparative *minor, minus* ("less"). The same base is seen in the English derivatives "minus, diminish." The superlative is *minimus* ("least"). Surely, you can think of a few derivatives here. "Minimal, minimum, Minnie Mouse." Just kidding.

The next form, *prior, prius* meaning "former," is defective, having no positive degree, only a comparative and superlative. You have to have two things to be able to put one in front of the other. That's why there's no positive. You can't be "in front" of only yourself. Well, you can but you have to be schizophrenic, and grammatically that counts as two of you. Thus, the only way to show the positive form of the base underlying *prior* is in the prepositions *pro* and *prae* ("before"), which is why Mr. Wheelock adds those in parentheses where the positive ought to be.

The superlative is *primus* ("first"). To deploy this word properly there should be at least three things. In other words to have a "first" you have to have a "second" and a "third." It drives me crazy when a person is standing in front of me and says "I'm first." You're not. You're "in front." "First" implies there are at least three of us, and since there are only two, that implies one of the two of us is schizophrenic, which isn't nice and isn't me. [I didn't convince you to stop saying that, did I? Okay, fine. Go ahead! Corrupt the English language. See if I care. You just made dying and leaving this world all that much easier for me. Please note "easier," proper use of the comparative degree.]

And the last of the seven deadly adjectives, *superus* ("above") has a comparative *superior, superius* ("higher"), which is not actually irregular. You even know the base *super-* from the preposition *super* which means ... "above." Nothing really challenging here. The superlative is the issue. There are two, neither predictable: one, *summus* which has a sense "highest"; and a second, *supremus* which has a different connotation "last." That is, the former shows altitude and the latter place in order. Again, please note correct use of comparatives (former and latter, not first and last).

Not only do we use adjective comparison a lot, the Romans did too. And so a lot of comparative and superlative forms leaked into English from Latin. Let's look at a few. They can help you memorize the Latin forms, if you recognize the English word. If you don't, you'll expand your English vocabulary. Either way you'll be gooder. I'll give you an English word derived from a Latin comparative or superlative form. You tell me, or guess, its definition.

Let's start with "ameliorate." What does *melior* mean in Latin? "Better." This is a verb, so what do you guess it means? "To make things ...better." And who hopes you do? An "optimist," who is always thinking things will turn out for the ... "best."

What does "major" mean literally? "Greater," as in the greater part of something, like the courses you take in college. And "maximal"? What degree is *maximus*? Superlative. So up the intensity of the adjective and you get ... "the greatest (part of something)."

What do you think "pejorative" means? What does *peior* mean in Latin? "Worse." So there's no way this substantive adjective can refer to something pleasing, can it? This has got to mean... "a very bad word, a curse" What about "pessimist"? That's "a person who always thinks the worst will happen."

Here's a simple one: "plus," like "1+1." What does "plus" actually mean? "More." So "1+1" is literally "1 more by 1." And if things are "plural," they're ... "more than one." Now what about the American motto *e pluribus unum*? You can translate that now. *Unum* means ... "one thing." *E* is the same as *ex* which means ... "from." And *pluribus*? What degree? Comparative, meaning "more, quite a few." Translation? "From quite a few (things), one (thing)," that is, "unity arising from plurality."

What about the English word "minor"? What does it mean literally? "The lesser part," as in the lesser part of your course-load. And "minimize"? "To make smallest, or just very small."

"Prior"? "Former."

"Prime"? "Foremost."

"Superior"? "Higher."

"Summit"? "The highest part of something."

"Supreme"? Literally, "the last, the final, the ultimate," like pizza that includes everything and will block your arteries and kill you, so it will be your "last."

But before that happens, let's do the vocabulary for this chapter, a great way to spend your last moments on earth. And speaking of earth, the first word is *sol*, *solis*, m., meaning "sun," the thing up in the sky, not the child you accidentally created. It's a 3rd-declension masculine noun. From this word English gets the derivative "solar." But the Indo-European *sol*- base underlying this word has also come into English through another less obvious path, the Greek word *helios* which also means "sun" and gave us our word *helium*, so-called because the element was first identified when scientists were studying the sun. But you say, *hel*- doesn't look like *sol*-? Ah, but it does, if you perform a little linguistic magic. In the same way that Latin at one point in its history experienced rhotacism and some *s*'s changed into *r*'s, Greek went through a period where an *s*- at the beginning of a word changed into *h*-. You can see that in English derivatives based on Greek and Latin numbers. Where Latin has *sex* ("six"), Greek has *hex*, as in "hexagon." Likewise, Greek *hepta* ("seven") is equivalent to Latin *septem*, as in "September." So the "sun"

base *sol-* changed to *hel-* in Greek. Okay, enough linguistics! What will be the ablative singular of this word? [It's third-declension and it's monosyllabic in its nominative singular, but is it *i*-stem? Nope, there aren't two consonants at the end of its base. So no *-i* in the ablative singular. The correct answer is...] *sole*.

Next word, *acer, acris, acre*, meaning "sharp, keen, eager, severe, fierce." It's a third-declension adjective and you can safely assume any third-declension adjective is *i*-stem. Remember that the term for a word like this is "three-termination," because it has three different endings in the nominative singular. Can you get the base from the masculine, the first form *acer*? No, the base contracts. You see the base first in the feminine nominative singular *acris*. Drop the *-is* ending and you have *acr-*. That's the base. So, what is the genitive plural of *acer*? That's right: *acrium*. It's *i*-stem. And the accusative plural neuter? *Acria*. You got it!

Here's another third-declension adjective, *facilis, facile*, meaning "easy, agreeable." It has to be *i*-stem too. And look at the underlying base *fac-*. We've seen it before in the verb *facio*. What does *facio* mean? "Make, do" So what does *facilis* mean literally? "Do-able"! Things that are do-able are easy. And the ablative singular of this word? What will it be? Excellent! *Facili*. It's *i*-stem.

The next word is *primus, -a, -um*, meaning "first, foremost, chief, principal." It's a first/second-declension adjective. It's a combination of *pro-* ("before, in front") and the superlative suffix in one of its incarnations *-imus*. So literally it means "fore-most."

The next word is another first/second-declension adjective, *pulcher, pulchra, pulchrum*, meaning "beautiful, handsome, fine." This adjective contracts, as you can see from the feminine of the nominative singular *pulchra*. So the base is *pulchr-*. What do you think the English derivative of this word "pulchritude" means? Of course, "beauty."

Here's another adjective, *sapiens, sapientis*, meaning "wise." But it often serves as a substantive, so in many dictionaries it's listed also as a noun "wise man." As a third-declension adjective ("wise") it's *i*-stem, but as a noun ("wise man") it's not. The base underlying this word, *sapi-*, means "having good taste," which is one way the ancient Romans saw wisdom.

And here's another adjective, *similis, simile*, third-declension and thus *i*-stem. It's another interesting word linguistically, deriving from an Indo-European root **sem-/som-* that means "(as) one." It's seen in Latin *semper* ("always," i.e. for once and all time) and *simul* ("at the same time," in other words "as one, together"). In English it appears as "same." Now, what would this base be in Greek? What did we just say happened to initial *s-* in Greek? It changed to *h-*. So this base showed up in Greek as **hen-*, the Greek for "one," preserved in the English derivative *henotheism*, "the worship of one god without the denial of other gods' existence."

The next item in this vocabulary list is a reference to the irregular superlatives in the first part of this chapter, the forms *facillimus, difficillimus, simillimus* meaning respectively "easiest," "hardest," and "most similar." Also, *liberrimus, pulcherrimus, acerrimus* ("freest," "most beautiful," "sharpest").

Following that are all the irregular comparatives and superlatives in the second part of the chapter, e.g. *melior/optimus*, *maior/maximus*, and so on. Please memorize these forms.

Next is a verb, *appello* (1), meaning “call (by name), name.” Literally, it means “push (*pell-*) toward (*ad-*),” with the implication “attack, accost, sue.” In Roman society that last sense (“sue”) produced the connotation “call by name” because of the frequency with which people on trial were called by name, as in “Mr. Brutus, where were you on the morning of March 15?”

The next word is *maior* (third-declension). We’ve already covered its formation but not all its senses. Its basic meaning “greater” to the Romans also implied “older,” because they understood *maior natu*, literally “greater by (or in terms of) birth.” Thus, it also has a related sense “ancestors, elders.” In this connotation it shows up almost always in the plural *maiores*, where it functions as a substantive, meaning literally “(those) greater (by birth/in years).” So if the Romans called their ancestors *maiores*, what do you think they called their descendants? Obviously, *minores* (lit., “[those] lesser [in years]”).

And the last word in this vocabulary is *felix, felicis*, meaning “lucky, fortunate, happy,” a third-declension adjective, so it’s *i*-stem. Remember what we called this type of third-declension adjective? No, not that! The correct term is one-termination. Don’t use bad language. As we noted before, Latin includes quite a few words drawn from agricultural contexts: *versus*, *altus*, *pax*. The Romans did a lot of farming, so country metaphors made a lot of sense. *Felix* is one of these. Literally, it means “fertile, abounding in produce or offspring.” A *felix* plant produces lots of fruit. While the base of this adjective is grammatically *felic-*, the underlying linguistic root is just *fe-* which means “cause to grow, make increase.” Thus, etymologically a *femina* is “the female person growing (a baby).” And how does she do that? By giving it suckle, breastfeeding it. That’s what *femina* means at heart.

So *felices liberi*, do the rules that were cited at the beginning of this chapter now make sense to you? If not, please review this presentation. If so, please proceed to the next slide.

For the next class meeting, please bring in a copy of the P&R sentences for Chapter 27 on pp. 129-130.

O minores maximi, certamen difficillimum vos manet, sed facillimum erit si magnā cum curā studebitis.