

Chapter 26: The Regular Comparison of Adjectives

Chapter 26 covers the following: the degrees of adjectives; the formation and use of comparative and superlative forms; comparative and superlative constructions using *quam*; and the ablative of comparison. At the end of the lesson we'll review the vocabulary which you should memorize in this chapter.

There are four important rules to remember in this chapter: (1) The affix used in Latin to create comparative adjectives is *-ior-*, meaning "more, -er (the ending which is added to many English adjectives to make them comparative)." All Latin comparatives employ third-declension endings. (2) The affix used in Latin to create superlative adjectives is *-issim-*, meaning "most," or the equivalent of adding "-est" to the end of an adjective in English. All Latin superlatives employ first/second-declension endings. (3) Latin has two ways to say "than" after a comparative form: a construction we'll call "*quam* + same case," and the ablative of comparison. (4) In Latin, *quam* with a superlative means "as (whatever the adjective is) as possible."

Let's start by looking at the terms introduced in this chapter. The concept explored here involves what grammarians refer to as "comparison," how to say the equivalent of the English forms "big, bigger, biggest." In doing so, the intensity of the adjective increases in stages called by grammarians "degrees." These clarify how much an adjective's basic sense affects the thought being expressed by a speaker or writer.

English and Latin both have three degrees. The first is called "positive," for instance, "big." It's the basic form of the adjective. This is the degree all adjectives we've studied so far have been. The second degree is called "comparative," like "bigger." It implies that something is "more (whatever the quality the adjective represents)," which means there have to be two things and one of them is "bigger" than the other. The third degree is called "superlative," for example, "biggest." Here, there must be three or more things, and one of them has the most of whatever the adjective's basic quality is. This one's "big," that one's "bigger," but that one next to the others is "biggest."

Let's start with superlatives, the highest degree, the counterpart of "most, -est" in English. Latin forms superlatives by taking an adjective base and adding *-issim-* plus first/second-declension endings, for instance, *cert-* + *-issim-* + *-us, -a, -um*, producing *certissimus, -a, -um*, meaning "most certain, surest;" or *dulc-* + *-issim-* + *-us, -a, -um*, producing *dulcissimus, -a, -um*, meaning "most pleasant, sweetest." Did you catch that? *Certus*? *Dulcis*? One's first/second-declension; the other's third. But both use *-issimus, -a, -um*, first/second-declension. That's good news, isn't it? No matter what the declension of the positive, a superlative is always first/second. And that's not all! If you order now, we'll send all Latin superlatives in a highly regular form! That's right! In just one small memorizing, you get "most" everything. Some restrictions apply; see Chapter 27.

By comparison, comparatives ... not so good. They're more complicated, really the only thing complicated in this chapter. Do the same things you do to create superlatives, but instead of *-issim-* add *-ior-* (representing both masculine and feminine), and you have a comparative adjective. In the neuter that'll be *-ius*.

Unlike superlatives, comparatives are third-declension. That includes all of them. So all comparatives are third; all superlatives are first/second, no matter what declension any of their positive forms belong to. Here's a chart with the comparative endings in all cases, numbers and genders. No real surprises in the formation here. Even the neuter singular *-ius* isn't all that unexpected when you think that *-us* shows up in third-declension neuters like *tempus* and *corpus*. The only shocker is that there are no *i*-stem forms. As a third-declension adjective a comparative should be *i*-stem, but it's not — for complicated linguistic reasons. If you're interested enough to know, ask me.

And here's an adjective, *brevis*, fully declined as a comparative adjective: *brevior*, *brevius*; *brevioris*, *breviori*, *breviorem*, *brevius*, *breviore*; and in the plural, *breviores*, *breviora*; *breviorum*, *brevioribus*, *breviores*, *breviora*, *brevioribus*. Again, note the absence of *i*-stem forms. And another thing to note is the deceptive similarity between the neuter nominative/accusative singular of the comparative adjective (the *-ius* ending) and the masculine nominative singular of the positive, just *-us* or *-is*. Thus, *certius* means “surer” — it's the neuter comparative— whereas *certus* means “sure, certain,” the positive form (masculine). Likewise, *dulcius* means “sweeter,” where *dulcis* means “sweet” (masculine/feminine).

Now let's address how to translate adjectives in the comparative and superlative degrees. The basic translations are “more” (comparative) and “most” (superlative), but the comparative can also convey a sense of “rather, quite, too,” i.e. “more than is necessary.” The superlative can mean “very, exceedingly,” i.e. “the most ever seen.” So degree forms don't always compare two or more things; sometimes they just intensify the adjective's basic sense.

And finally, let's talk about expectation. When an adjective is comparative, and has its basic sense, “more,” what do you expect to hear after a comparative adjective, e.g. “This is bigger ...”? ...than! When comparatives carry a sense of “more,” they expect a way of expressing the thing which is not “more,” what the bigger thing is bigger than. And Latin has two ways of saying “than.”

One is to use *quam* — that's right, *quam* again, but not in the sense of “whom” or “how”! — this time as a conjunction meaning “than.” So what case should the word that follows *quam* be, the thing being compared? *Quam*'s not a preposition — one of the few things it isn't — so it's not going to take an ablative or accusative automatically. What's the grammatical relationship between the two things being compared, e.g. “This is bigger than that.” Grammatically, comparison operates the same way as apposition because two nouns are equated, or in this case *not* equated but grammatically that's the same thing. So how do appositives work? They take the same case as the noun to which they're being equated. That's exactly how the noun after *quam* works. It's put in the same case as the noun to which it's being linked and compared. We're going to use this convention when a noun operates this way. If I underline such a word and ask you “what case and why,” you give the case, whatever it may be, and then say “*quam* + same case,” for instance, *Romani fortiores quam hostes sunt*, meaning “The Romans are braver than the enemy.” *Hostes* is nominative here, because it's being compared to *Romani* (“the Romans”) which is the nominative subject of the sentence.

Let's practice that a little. Take the sentence, *Fidelior isti quam* (some form of) *ego eras*, meaning "You were more loyal to him than ... (some form of 'I')." What case of the first-person pronoun *ego* should be used here? Well, what two things are being compared? *Isti* and *ego*. What case is *isti* here? It means "to him," so it's dative. Thus, *ego* should be dative, too, right? What's the dative of *ego*? *Mihi*.

Let's try another sentence: *Nihil pulchrius quam* (some form of) *libertas scio*, meaning "I know nothing more beautiful than (some form of the word 'liberty')." Can you figure this out on your own? What's being compared? *Nihil* and *libertas*. How's *nihil* functioning in the sentence? It's the direct object of *scio*. So it's what case? Accusative. What's the accusative of *libertas*? What declension is *libertas*? Third. So, ...? *Libertatem*.

One more sentence: *Vitam iucundiozem in pace quam* (some form of) *bellum semper agemus*, meaning "We will always live a more pleasant life in peace than in (some form of the word 'war')." Do it for yourself. The thing being compared to? *Pace*. Its case? Ablative. What's the ablative of *bellum*? *Bello*. Not hard, is it? As long as there's a *quam* serving as the equivalent of "than," there's not much to learn here, but that's not the only option.

Latin has another way of saying "than:" the ablative of comparison in which the equivalent of the word following "than" in English is put in the ablative case — no *quam*, no preposition — just the word in the ablative. Of course, there has to be a comparative form to trip off the ablative of comparison, but again it's very simple, so simple it can be confusing. After all, the solo ablative has a number of other applications in Latin: means, time, separation, even manner. For that reason, the Romans used the ablative of comparison less often than "*quam* + same case," in fact, only when the thing being compared to was in the nominative or accusative case. How confusing it would be if it were ablative, for instance! A Roman could have put in *quam* + same case — in this case, ablative — or not (using the ablative of comparison which all by itself implies "than"), and both would mean "than whatever-the-noun" either way. So using *quam* just makes everything simpler, clearer. And the Romans liked simple and clear. It was simple, and clear.

Let's take the same sentences we used before and say "than" with the ablative of comparison instead of *quam*. First sentence: *Fidelior isti quam mihi eras*. Earlier, we used *mihi* because the form of *ego* was functioning as "*quam* + same case" and was being compared to *isti* (which is dative). But if we take the *quam* out, what case should the form of *ego* be now? It's simple. Just make it ablative, and the ablative form of *ego* is ... (*ego*, *mei*, *mihi*, *me*, ...) *me*. And notice it means exactly the same thing as it does if you use *quam*. These expressions are interchangeable in meaning.

Next sentence. Originally we had: *Nihil pulchrius quam libertatem scio*. Take out the *quam* and what form of *libertas* do you want? What's the ablative of *libertas*? *Libertate*.

Last example. *Vitam iucundiozem in pace quam bello semper agemus*. You do it! Take out *quam*, and what case should *bellum* be? Ablative! And what's the ablative of *bellum*? Yep, that's right: back to *bello*. This is the use of the ablative of comparison the Romans tended to avoid. In other words, it's bad Latin. Let's get out of here in case bad comparison is contagious.

Quam can also be used with superlatives, but when it is, it means something totally different: “as (whatever the adjective is) as possible, the most (whatever the adjective is) possible.” [Yes, another use of *quam*! That makes what? Three hundred? Well, it’s really not totally new. This *quam* is an extension of the adverbial *quam* “how,” literally “how most (whatever the adjective is),” that is, “in the way that produces the most (whatever the adjective is).” That didn’t improve your understanding or your mood, did it? Okay, you’re on your own. Just learn the idiom.] Here’s an example: *vir quam fidelissimus*, meaning “a man as loyal as possible, the most loyal possible man.” And another example: *feminarum quam beatissimarum*, “of women as happy as possible, of the happiest possible women.”

And all of you happiest possible women, come with me. Let’s do some vocabulary. Okay, guys too!

The first word is *auctor*, *auctoris*, m., meaning “increaser, author, originator.” It’s a third-declension noun. Is it *i*-stem? Not monosyllabic, not parisyllabic. Must not be. This noun comes from the base *aug-* that means “increase, cause to grow.” Thus, originally an “author” was the person who made a book “grow.” And some of them use lots of fertilizer.

The next word is another noun: *lux*, *lucis*, f., meaning “light.” It’s third declension. This one’s monosyllabic so is it *i*-stem? Nope, doesn’t have two consonants at the end of its base, only one, *-c-*.

Next on this vocabulary list is *quidam*, *quaedam*, *quiddam/quoddam*, meaning “a certain one/thing, someone, something”. It’s a pronoun, but it often functions adjectivally, in which case it means “a certain, some.” It’s a compound of *qui/quae/quod* (*quid*), plus the suffix *-dam*, which is not to be confused with the suffix *-dem*, seen in *idem* (“the same”); or the ending of *quidem*, the adverb that means “certainly.” What’s the genitive singular of *quidam*? [That’s really a question about *qui*, isn’t it? What’s the genitive of *qui*? *Cuius*. So what would be the genitive singular of *quidam*?] Good, *cuiusdam*. Translate it. “Of a certain person/thing.”

Next word: *acerbus*, *-a*, *-um*, meaning “harsh, bitter, grievous.” It’s a first/second-declension adjective.

Next word: *clarus*, *-a*, *-um*, another first/second-declension adjective. It means “clear, bright, renowned, famous, illustrious.”

Here’s another adjective: *potens*, *potentis*, meaning “able, powerful, mighty, strong.” What declension is it? Third, of course. But is it *i*-stem? Not monosyllabic, not parisyllabic, but it does look a lot like a participle, doesn’t it: *-nt-* at the end of the base, third-declension endings? It is a participle, the present active participle of *possum*, “being able.” So “Is it *i*-stem?” is really a question of whether participles are *i*-stem? Are they? Well, they can be if they function as adjectives, and this one is. So let’s call it “*i*-stem” with the understanding that, when it doesn’t act like a true adjective or go with a noun right next to it, then it will become non-*i*-stem. Assuming it’s functioning as a true adjective (and it almost always does), its neuter accusative plural will be ...*potentia*.

Next word, another adjective — could it be that this is a chapter about adjectives? — *turpis*, *turpe*, meaning “shameful, base, disgraceful,” third-declension. No issue here. This one is definitely *i*-stem. So then what will its ablative singular be? Yep, *turpi*. And its accusative plural neuter? *Turpia*. I’m going to stop asking that. You know it.

The next word is a preposition, *pro*, meaning “in front of, before, on behalf of, for the sake of, in return for, instead of, for, as.” [That’s like half the dictionary.] It takes the ablative case. One way to remember that long list of meanings is to understand that it’s cognate with English “for.” Thus, Latin *pro* and English “for” share a number of basic senses, including a locative sense (“in front of, before”) and two figurative senses: “for the sake of” and “in return for.”

The next word is *quam*, the word for “than” we studied above. It functions as an adverb or conjunction. The “than” sense exists only in the presence of comparative forms, such as *certius quam...*, “(a thing) more certain than...” This is the construction we just studied, “*quam* + same case.” With superlatives it imports the sense “as (whatever the adjective is) as possible,” literally, “how most ...,” for instance, *quam certissimum*, “(a thing) as certain as possible.” As we noted above, Latin has a number of *quam*’s, including an adverb that means “how” and a relative pronoun form which means “whom” (accusative singular feminine).

The next word is a verb that’s simple to form but has a tricky meaning: *vito* (1), “shun, avoid.” The verb *vito* (“avoid”) looks a lot like the noun *vita* (“life”), but these two words are unrelated in their sense or etymology. Do not confuse them. In other words, don’t avoid life!

And the last word in this vocabulary list is *remedium*, *-ii*, n., meaning “cure, remedy.” It’s a second-declension neuter noun, and an excellent reminder about another word, *cura*, *-ae*, which does not mean “cure” but “care.” *Remedium*’s neuter, so what’s its accusative plural? Good, *remedia*. And its genitive singular? *remedii*. The first *-i-* belongs to the base; the second is the genitive singular ending.

That wasn’t so bad, was it? Nothing like indirect statement. 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 26.

Nihil pulchrius quam bona discere est.