

Unit 42 - Making comparisons

1 Definitions

The **comparative** is the form of an adjective or adverb that indicates that the quality being described is possessed to a greater extent. For example in the sentence *He is taller than I am*, the word *taller* is a comparative adjective ; and in the sentence *He did better than I did*, the word *better* is a comparative adverb.

The **superlative** is the form of an adjective or adverb that expresses the highest or a very high degree of the quality being described. For example in the sentence *She is the brightest pupil in the class*, the word *brightest* is a superlative adjective ; and in the sentence *Of all the students, she performed best*, the word *best* is a superlative adverb.

2 Comparative and superlative adjectives

2.1 Regular formation

Generally, comparative adjectives are formed in French using *plus*, *moins* or *aussi*, whilst *que* links one noun or pronoun with another noun or pronoun (equivalent of *than* in English).

Il est **plus fort** que moi en math

He is better than me in maths

Superlative adjectives are formed using the definite article *le*, *la*, *les* with *plus* or *moins*.

C'est lui **le plus fort** de la classe

He's the strongest in the class

2.2 Using superlative adjectives with nouns

2.2.1 When applied to adjectives used **before** the noun, the superlative is quite straightforward :

C'est **le plus grand** fabricant de voitures du monde

It is the largest car producer in the world

Note here that when English uses the preposition *in* after a superlative adjective (*the best in the world*), French prefers *de* (*le meilleur du monde*).

Where *aussi* comes after a negative it can be replaced by *si* :

La situation n'est pas **aussi** / **si** grave qu'il y a dix ans

The situation isn't as serious as it was ten years ago

2.2.2 When the adjective being used normally comes **after** the noun, the definite article must be used with the superlative adjective as well as the noun :

C'est **le pays le plus riche** du monde

It's the richest country in the world

Failure to repeat the definite article in this way can result in a different meaning :

Les membres plus riches de l'Union Européenne

*The **richer** members of the European Union*

Les membres **les** plus riches de l'Union Européenne

*The **richest** members of the European Union*

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The definite article must be used with the superlative adjective even if the preceding noun is qualified by a possessive adjective :

Sa qualité **la plus impressionnante** résidait dans sa capacité de garder son sang-froid
His most impressive quality was her ability to stay calm

Of course, the adjective and its article must agree with the preceding noun :

C'est de loin **la** fille **la plus intelligente** de la classe
She's easily the brightest girl in the class

This applies even if the noun is part of a phrase beginning *l'un des* :

L'un des avantages **les plus évidents** de ce système réside dans son efficacité
One of the most obvious advantages of this system is its efficiency

2.3 Superlative adjectives and ordinal numbers

In English superlative adjectives can be used in conjunction with ordinal numbers, as in :

It's the **fourth largest** car producer in the world

In French such a construction is not possible. For most cases it is possible simply to ignore the adjective and rely on the context to make the meaning of the adjective clear :

C'est le **4ème** fabricant de voitures du monde

2.4 Subjunctive after superlative adjectives

Remember that in a relative clause following a superlative adjective, the verb must be in the subjunctive (see 17:1.1.1) :

C'est la situation la plus grave que j'**aie** jamais connue
It's the most serious situation I've ever seen

2.5 Note the irregular adjectival forms :

bon	meilleur	le meilleur
mauvais	plus mauvais	le plus mauvais
	/ pire	/ le pire

3 Comparative and superlative adverbs

3.1 Regular formation

As with adjectives, comparative adverbs are formed using *plus*, *moins* or *aussi*, with *que* acting as link word (equivalent of *than* in English):

Il a réagi **plus calmement** que moi / que je ne le craignais
He reacted more calmly than I did / than I expected

Superlative adverbs are formed using the definite article *le* with *plus* or *moins* :

C'est Marie qui a couru **le plus vite**
It was Marie who ran fastest

Note that the *le* is invariable, i.e. you do not write **C'est Marie qui a couru la plus vite*.

3.2 Irregulars

Note the irregular adverbial forms :

bien	mieux	le mieux
<i>well</i>	<i>better</i>	<i>(the) best</i>
beaucoup	plus	le plus
<i>many / a lot</i>	<i>more</i>	<i>(the) most</i>
peu	moins	le moins
<i>few</i>	<i>less</i>	<i>(the) least</i>

Note that *bien* can also be used as an adjective, taking the same comparative and superlative forms of *bien* the adverb. It can have various meanings, e.g. :

Ce livre est très bien	(good)
Elle est très bien dans cette robe	(nice, pretty)
C'est une personne très bien	(trustworthy)
Je suis bien ici	(at ease, happy)
Je suis bien dans ces chaussures	(comfortable)
Je ne me sens pas bien	(I don't feel well)

Note also that *mal* meaning *badly* has the comparative *plus mal*, and the superlative *le plus mal*. However the irregular forms *pis* and *le pis* are still used in set expressions such as *tant pis* (*too bad*) or *de mal en pis* (*from bad to worse*).

4 Other points

4.1 Comparatives with "expletive" *ne*

When using *plus ... que* or *moins ... que* followed by a verb, *ne* is sometimes added before the verb without any negative meaning. This is called an "expletive" *ne*, and in this context is optional :

La situation est **plus** grave **que** je (**ne**) le croyais
The situation is more serious than I thought

However, *ne* is **not** used when using *aussi ... que* :

La situation n'était pas **aussi** grave **que** je le croyais
The situation was not as serious as I had thought

4.2 Comparatives with neutral pronoun *le* (see also 25:2.1)

Where *plus*, *moins* or *aussi* are followed by *que* plus a verb, the verb is often preceded by the neutral pronoun *le* :

Cet étudiant est plus doué que je ne l'ai d'abord cru
This student is more gifted than I first thought

4.3 Comparison of infinitives

If there is a comparison between two courses of action, and the main verb is not normally followed by a preposition, the second infinitive is usually preceded by *de* :

J'aimerais mieux rester à la maison que **d'aller** en ville
I'd prefer to stay at home than to go into town

There is no *de* before the second infinitive if the ideas expressed by the infinitives are more abstract :

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Mieux vaut prévenir que guérir - *Better safe than sorry*

However, if the infinitives are governed by another preposition, this preposition will precede both infinitives :

C'est plus facile à dire qu'à faire - *It's easier said than done*

4.4 Double comparisons

Note that while English uses the definite article before the comparative word in double comparisons, French doesn't :

Plus je travaille, **plus** je comprends
The more I work, the more I understand

4.5 More than / less than

When used to indicate more than or less than a specific quantity, *than* is translated by *de* : *plus de 10 francs* = more than ten francs, *en moins d'une année* = in less than a year.

Otherwise *que* is used : *il gagne plus que toi* = he earns more than you.

4.6 Using possible

Note that when using the intensifier *possible* the preposition *que* is left out in superlative expressions :

le plus tôt possible - *as soon as possible*
le moins possible - *as little as possible*

But not in comparative expressions :

aussi vite que possible - *as quickly as possible*
autant que possible - *as much as possible*

4.7 Pronunciation of *plus*

- When used as a comparative or superlative *plus* is generally pronounced [ply] (like *tu*) :
Il est **plus** petit que moi - *He's smaller than me*
Elle est la **plus** petite de sa famille - *She's the smallest in her family*
Elle a réagi **plus** rapidement que moi - *She reacted more quickly than I did*
C'est elle qui a réagi le **plus** rapidement - *It was she who reacted the most quickly*
Plus on lit, **plus** on apprend - *The more you read, the more you learn*
- If *plus* is followed by a vowel then it is pronounced [plyz] (i.e. soft -s) :
C'est l'élève la **plus** intelligente de la classe - *She's the cleverest in the class*
- If *plus* comes at the end of a clause it is generally pronounced [plys] (i.e. hard -s) :
Elles sont toutes les deux douées mais Marie l'est **plus**
They are both gifted, but Marie is more so
- An exception to this is in *ne...plus* constructions, where the pronunciation is always [ply].
- In the structures *plus que* and *plus de* both [ply] and [plys] can be used.
- When used in the sense of mathematical addition, the pronunciation is [plys].