On Certain Differences between English and Japanese: A Study of Superlative Expressions

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to compare the English and Japanese superlative expressions and to indicate that the English noun in the superlative form can be pluralized, which means that it does not confine itself to the one and only one thing. In Japanese, on the contrary, the superlative expression refers to the only one entity, by definition. This sharp difference between English and Japanese can primarily be ascribed to the particular nature of English preposition *of*, which is most likely to be used to express the whole-part relationship.

**Keywords:** superlative expressions, differences between English and Japanese, built-in multiplicity

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1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that superlative expressions are often ambiguous between what Szabolcsi (1986) calls absolute and comparative interpretations. For example, *the highest mountain* in (1) allows both the absolute interpretation ‘the mountain that is higher than any other (of the mountains in question)’ and the comparative interpretation ‘a mountain higher than any of the other (persons in question) climbed’:

(1) Who climbed the highest mountain?

Besides the two readings proposed by Szabolcsi, however, it seems that the superlative expression in
English has also the characteristic that it is able to partake of built-in multiplicity in itself. Consider the following:

(2) a. Tokyo is one of the most interesting cities in the world once you get used to it. (NHK's Radio English Conversation Program in 1982)

b. In fact, the possibility of conjunction offers one of the best criteria for the initial determination of phrase structure. (Chomsky (1957))

c. Sampras experienced one of the worst defeats of his career against Bastl, who had won just one previous grass-court match. Bastl only made it into the draw Sunday as a "lucky loser" from qualifying after Spain's Felix Mantilla pulled out with a knee injury. (http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/tennis/2002/wimbledon/)

d. Among the most recent errors, the newspaper observed, was the answer "The Union Jack" in answer to a question about the name of the English flag. (http://us.imdb.com/SB20010829 #1)

This is the very construction we are going to tackle in this paper. Notice here that the English noun in the superlative form is pluralized in the sentences above. However, there is an acute difference between English and Japanese in the form of superlative expressions. Consider also the following examples:

(3) *English Superlative Expressions*

a. What is the largest animal?

b. One of the largest animals is a whale.

(4) *Japanese Superlative Expressions*

a. mottomo ookii doobutu ha nandesu-ka
   SUPERLATIVE   large   animal is what-Q
   'What is the largest animal?'

b. ?*mottomo ookii doobutu no hitotu ha kujira-desu
   SUPERLATIVE   large   animal of one is a whale-POLITENESS
   'One of the largest animals is a whale.'

Even the cursory comparison between (3) and (4) leads us to notice that in English the noun in the superlative expression can be pluralized (cf. (3)b), namely, it is not limited to the one and only one thing, which makes a keen contrast with Japanese.

The aim of this article is to compare the English and Japanese superlative expressions and to show that the English noun in the superlative form can be pluralized, which means that it can refer to more than one thing. It goes without saying that in Japanese, on the contrary, the superlative expression refers to the one and only one thing, precisely by definition. A natural question to be asked at this point is: what is responsible for this kind of acute difference between English and Japanese? The rest of this paper will be earnestly devoted to seeking a proper solution to this recalcitrant problem.
2. Some Data on the Pluralization of Superlative Expressions in English

In this section we will go over a lot of additional examples including superlative expressions in English. Pay special attention to the fact that superlative expressions in English are all preceded by *one of/among* and pluralized:

(5) Tokyo is one of the most interesting cities in the world once you get used to it. (NHK’s Radio English Conversation Program in 1982)

(6) Sampras is equipped with one of the best serves in the game and Agassi with one of the best returns. That should make for compelling tennis. (http://sports.lycos.com/news/20010904/ten20010904.AP.998436294.html)

(7) Against Hewitt, one of the best returners in the game, Safin lost his temper and hit a ball into the stands, getting penalized and dropping his serve in the eighth game of the second set. But he broke right back and served out the match with a booming ace. (http://tennis.lycos.com/sports/tennis/tennis__story.jsp?story=8F6A49C89624DA6E452F243FF23A2014E1ED35)

(8) In fact, the possibility of conjunction offers one of the best criteria for the initial determination of phrase structure. (Chomsky (1957))

(9) It’s one of the best that have come out this year, I think. (Freitas (1978))

(10) Agassi said Sunday he has watched McEnroe playing doubles, and “he still is one of the best on the court.” (http://sports.lycos.com/sports/tennis/tennis__story.jsp?story=69DAF499A0C12FC254D46370A8632CA9B76E5A2F)

(11) Niesha Butler was supposed to lead Georgia Tech to an N.C.A.A. basketball title. But it hasn’t worked out that way for one of the best athletes to emerge from New York City. (http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/26/sports/ncaabasketball/26BUTL.html?todaysheadlines)

(12) Harold Pinter is one of the best-known playwrights in the Western world. Also, as the Lincoln Center Festival will show, a versatile actor, director and film writer. (http://partners.nytimes.com/2001/07/15/arts/theater/15BILL.html?todaysheadlines)

(13) Dan Rice was one of the 19th century’s most famous popular entertainers, and one of the best-known people of his time. (http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/27/arts/27RICE.html?todaysheadlines)

(14) She must be one of the most remarkable women that ever lived. (Quirk (1985))

(15) One of the most common characteristics of the English verb is that it can combine with prepositions and adverb particles. (Alexander (1990))

(16) One of rock music’s most intriguing personalities, David Bowie has enjoyed widespread popularity and critical acclaim throughout his 30-year career. (http://www.nytimes.com/guests/nytoday/bin/event?st=event&eid=1033980806317&8nyh)

(17) One of the most intriguing discoveries of modern linguistics is that there appears to be a common anatomy in all phrases in all the world’s languages.

(18) One of the most characteristic traits of ModE is the formal identity of a great many words belonging to different word-classes; …. (Jespersen (1961))
(19) it became clear that the puzzling behavior of intransitive verbs is one of the most intriguing and fundamental facts of syntactic typology. (Book Review by Sebastian Shaumyan)

(20) Hong Kong is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating places for linguists. Language education in Hong Kong is presently not just a hot intellectual issue, it is also a serious practical concern for every educator. We hope that this open forum would help researchers, teachers, and policy makers on both theoretical and practical fronts.

(21) Dog walking is probably one of the most popular forms of exercise in England. It is also a way of making friends. People who walk their dogs over the same route at the same time daily will naturally get to know each other. (Mallory Fromm, *Culture Without Conflict*)

(22) Statistically, commercial air travel is one of the safest forms of transportation available. But spectacular disasters like the explosion of TWA Flight 800 last summer, the earlier crash of a Valujet plane into the Florida Everglades, and the 1988 terrorist bombing of a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, have led the flying public to ask whether more precautions might reasonably be taken to reduce the risk of passenger fatalities. (EDITORIAL: *MAKING AIR TRAVEL SAFER* c.1997 N.Y. Times News Service)

(23) Get is one of the commonest words in English, and is used in many different ways. (Swan (1995))

(24) It was probably one of the worst, if not the worst, conditions I’ve played in as far as wind. (John McEnroe, quoted in *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*, 8 May 1983)

(25) Mayor Michael Bloomberg had reason to feel chipper about the city’s response to one of the worst storms in New York history. (http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/20/opinion/20THU2.html?th)

(26) After one of the worst weeks in the capital’s history, the question was suspended like a spore in the autumn air: Are we quagmiring ourselves again? (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/28/opinion/28DOWD.html?today’sheadlines)

(27) I’m one of the worst spendthrifts that ever was born. (Mark Twain)

(28) This is one of the worst movies I have seen on screen or at 3 a.m. on cable when I couldn’t sleep. (http://movies2.nytimes.com/mnr/movies/mnr _ read.html?fid=.f4071d8&showtimes=1& trailer=1&title=The%20League%20of%20Extraordinary%20Gentlemen%20%28Movie%29&title2=League%20of%20Extraordinary%20Gentlemen%2c%20The%20%28Movie%29&reviewer=Elvis%20Mitchell&sort=helpful)

(29) Philip Morris, the owner of one of the world’s best-known corporate names, plans to change that name next year to the Altria Group. (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/16/business/16NAME.html?today’shea dlines)

(30) Besides Enron itself, no company has been more seriously wounded by its collapse than Arthur Andersen & Company, one of the world’s largest accounting firms. (http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/13/business/yourmoney/13ANDE.html?today’sheadlines)

(31) Guglielmo Cinque is one of the world’s leading theoretical syntacticians, and is particularly known for his application of recent theory to the analysis of Italian. (Amazon.com)
(32) One of the world's most wanted men has been operating for years with the protection and backing of the Iranian intelligence services.

(33) David Beckham's long career at Manchester United may be ending, and news about one of the world's highest-paid and highest-profile soccer stars is spooling incessantly.

(34) Among the most recent errors, the newspaper observed, was the answer "The Union Jack" in answer to a question about the name of the English flag.
(http://us.imdb.com/sb?20010829 #1)

(35) Art Spander thinks Pete Sampras, with this 13 Grand Slam titles, has to be considered among the best athletes, not merely tennis players, of all time.
(http://tennis.lycos.com/Sports/tennis/tennis _ _ story.jsp?BV _ _ SessionID= @@@ @@ 0184165769.0963237000@@@ @@&BV _ _ EngineID=dalifeckdmhbfejchjcfnchim.0&BV _ _ UseBVCookie=no&story=709E6A267AE9C51FE2A2BF8ABC1FE52260B47)

(36) The present work (henceforth CVS [for "Constraints on Variables in Syntax," the working title]) is one of the most important in the history of so-called generative-transformational grammar introduced by Noam Chomsky in the mid 1950's and developed by him and others since. Although not published until now, CVS was distributed by the Indiana University Linguistics Club, and it is among the most frequently cited works in the transformational tradition. It has influenced and stimulated in one way or another a massive amount of later work.
(Forward by Paul M. Postal in Ross (1986))

3. An Interaction of Superlative Expressions and of-Genitives

Now that we are left with a lot of English examples including superlative expressions preceded by one of/among, it is needless to say that we have to ask ourselves why the English noun in the superlative form can be pluralized in such cases. One reason, we claim, can be tracked to the particular nature of English genitive constructions, especially the preposition of. It is most likely to be used to express the whole-part relationship, which makes a keen contrast with Japanese. Go through the following sentences, which share the basic pattern of expression with the sentences in the preceding section, but only minimally differ from them in that the following sentences do not contain any superlative expression:2

(37) Lack of medical care is only one of the reasons for the high mortality that we have shown (*that) exists in this area. (Declerck (1991))

(38) School children have adopted the fund as one of their favourite charities; their small contributions have enabled the fund to reach its target. (Quirk (1985))

(39) One of the students made several remarks, all of which were quite pertinent. (Declerck (1991))

(40) We understand that the police wish to interview one of the car drivers. (Chalker (1990))
Of interesting is the fact that *among* is almost completely interchangeable with *one of* in this situation, too.

(41) *Among* the many questions ignored here is the fixing of lexical concepts; .... (Chomsky (1995))

(42) *Among* the matters still to be clarified is the status of the MLC. (Chomsky (1995))

(43) Bartholdi’s home is *among* the many museums in the city, displaying how he lived and some of his creations.

We can also obtain another piece of supporting evidence from German, which has a strikingly similar expression with English. Consider the following example:

(44) Ein (Mann) der Maenner ist geheiratet.
    one (man) of men is married
    ‘one of the men is married’

Notice also the intriguing examples here, where *some* and the superlative form are almost immediately combined. The word *some*, of course, indicates that there must be more than one “superlative” things as its presupposition.

(45) Japanese cameras are *some of* the best in the world.

(46) These two facts underlie all uses of *all*. Some of the most important of these uses are discussed in the sections that follow. (Alexander (1990))

(47) *Some of* the world’s biggest investment banks have recently taken steps to strengthen their electricity and natural gas trading operations.

(48) President Bush presumably meant well when he cut off funds for *some of* the world’s most vulnerable women, but here in the shantytowns of Africa, it means women and girls will die.

(49) *Some of* the worst incidents, as we know now, were instigated by government provocateurs, though a few, without doubt, represented excesses of the student movement itself. (Chomsky (1998))

(50) The mispronunciation of these is sanctioned by only one lexicon, *the Merriam-Webster Third International*. *Some of* the worst offenders are newscasters, who seem to think it adds a touch of elegance to their pear-shaped tones to say ON-clave and ON-voy.
(*Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*)

It should be noted that *some of* can be replaced by *among* in this case:
(51) The coldwater pipes are among the most frequent causes of trouble in a house. (Chalker (1990))

(52) Among the most important contributions to such an understanding are Reinhart (1976), Lasnik (1976). (Burzio (1986))

(53) Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Mary Higgins Clark and Sue Grafton, usually among the bankable of best-selling writers, sold far fewer copies of their books than expected this past year. (http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/20/business/media/20B00K.html?8bu)

(54) The fact that some of these friends are among the most eminent experts in the world on American, British, and other varieties of English has contributed beyond measure to the confidence with which we assign such descriptive labels as ‘AmE’ and ‘BrE’. (Quirk(1985))

(55) Fans at Roland Garros are among the most passionate anywhere, either loving or hating the players who toil before them. (http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/tennis/2001/french__open/)

Further supporting evidence comes from the fact that the words such as last and only, which are semantically akin to superlative expressions, can take a pluralized form of noun, resulting into a phrase like the last ones, the only ones. Consider the following examples:

(56) Because I am the only Korean teacher at my school, we are the last ones to get funding... Any ideas for strengthening our position? (listserv@VM1.SPCS.UMN.EDU)

(57) They have yet to play, but Hingis and fourth-seeded Jennifer Capriati are the only ones remaining among the six top-ranked players, as Lindsay Davenport and Monica Seles are injured. (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/29/sports/29TENN.html)

(58) On a day filled with darkness and frustration for many businesses, disaster recovery companies are some of the only ones having a good day. (http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/16/technology/16BACK.html?th0)

(59) Yes, America should look a little deeper into its policies and actions, but we're not the only ones who need to look in the mirror. (http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/05/opinion/05FRIE.html?todayheadlines)

Judging from these sentences, we unambiguously understand that the superlative form in English has the significant characteristic that it is able to partake of built-in multiplicity in itself.

4. Conclusion

As a concluding remark, I would like to summarize what I have convincingly claimed in this article; namely, we show that the English noun in the superlative expression can be pluralized, which means that it does not confine itself to the one and only one entity. In Japanese, on the contrary, the superlative expression refers to the only one thing, by definition. This sharp difference between English and
Japanese can mainly be reduced to the particular nature of English preposition of, which is most likely to be used to express the whole-part relationship.

Notes
1. Henceforth, it is to be noted that certain earlier examples are repeated and renumbered, for ease of reference.

2. With regard to the behaviour of one of, Chalker (1990:283) makes a remark as follows:

   one of is always followed by a plural noun or pronoun (or a possessive pronoun). A verb following the one-phrase is singular or plural depending on the meaning:
   • One of my friends has just gone to Mexico. (= A friend has...)
   • If you haven't got a case I'll lend you one of mine.
   • Any/each/every one of these/thes would be suitable.
   • Not one of these torches is any good. (= none of them...)
   • He is one of those awful people who are always late for everything.

References

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Robert Ross), Ablex Publishing Corporation, Norwood, New Jersey. (Originally presented as the author's thesis (Ph.D. -Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1967) under the title: *Constraints on Variables in Syntax.*)


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