Two Paths to Superlatives in Palestinian Arabic

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LASC, April 16, 2026

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1 Introduction

▷ Superlatives such as (1) are well known to be ambiguous between two readings (Heim 2000, 1999, Farkas & Kiss 2000, Szabolcsi 1986, Heim 1985):

(1) Mary climbed the highest mountain

a. e.g. Mary climbed the highest mountain *in Africa* (Absolute reading)
b. e.g. Mary climbed the highest mountain *among her friends* (Relative reading)

- **Absolute**: the comparison is among contextually relevant mountains (DP internal elements)
- **Relative**: the comparison is among contextually relevant people (DP external elements)

▷ The literature is divided on the role of definiteness marking: a definite-marked DP may receive different denotations depending on the superlative reading.

- Heim (2000) and Szabolcsi (1986): definite in the absolute reading, but indefinite at LF in the relative reading
- Coppock & Beaver (2014): definite (uniqueness presupposition) on both readings, with the contrast arising from determinacy (= referentiality): The absolute DP is determinate, the relative DP indeterminate
- Hallman (2021): indefinite on both readings. Absolute DPs pattern like indefinites in lacking familiarity

▷ **The focus of this talk**: Superlatives in Palestinian Arabic, as in (2)

▷ PA disambiguates the two readings via distinct syntactic structures and unexpected definiteness marking:[1]

(2) a. Bare/optional definite superlative

jasmin ʃarat ***(el)-ayla*** ***baskalet***
Yasmine bought (the)-expensive.ER bike

'(of all relevant expensive bikes) Yasmine bought the most expensive one.' (Optional definiteness, Absolute)

b. Polydefinite superlative

jasmin ʃarat ***el-baskalet el-ayla***
Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive.ER

'(of all the relevant people) Yasmine bought the most expensive bike.' (Polydefinite, Relative)

⇒ The DP in *bare* superlative has optional definiteness marking
⇒ The DP in *polydefinite* superlative has obligatory polydefiniteness marking

▷ To establish a baseline, consider how definiteness marking works with positive (non-comparative adjective) DPs:[2]

(3) a. *jasmin ʃarat* ***el-baskalet el-ʕaːli***
Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive
'Yasmine bought **the** expensive bike' Polydefinite Pos.

b. *jasmin ʃarat* ***baskalet ʕaːli***
Yasmine bought bike expensive
'Yasmine bought **an** expensive bike.' Bare positive

Proposal:

1. Morphological definiteness does not predict semantic definiteness in superlatives:
   - The *bare* superlative is morphologically indefinite, but semantically definite
   - The *polydefinite* superlative is morphologically definite, but semantically indefinite
2. The *bare* superlative is a true superlative, whereas the *polydefinite* superlative is a comparative with a phrasal standard *from the others*, retrieved anaphorically

[1] Arabic lacks a dedicated superlative morpheme.
[2] A positive adjective is one in its base form, such as *smart, tall, beautiful*, as opposed to a comparative or superlative form.

2 Definiteness Marking and (Non-)Referentiality

▷ I show that the DP within:

- The *bare* superlative is definite and determinate ⇒ denotes an individual of type *e*
- The *polydefinite* superlative is definite and indeterminate ⇒ denotes an existential quantifier of type <et,t>, but with a uniqueness presupposition

2.1 On Definiteness and Determinacy

▷ (Coppock & Beaver 2014, 2015) propose two notions that are independent of each other:

- Definiteness = uniqueness presupposition: the description holds of at most one entity
- Determinacy = existence presupposition: the DP picks out a specific individual

▷ These come apart: a DP can be definite (uniqueness presupposition) without being determinate (referential)

(4) a. Determinate: IOTA(P)= $\iota[P(x)]$ *e*
b. Definite and indeterminate: EX(THE(P))= $\lambda Q.\exists x[\partial[|P| \leq 1] \wedge P(x) \wedge Q(x)]$ <et,t>

(5) *the*: $\lambda P \lambda x[\partial[|P| \leq 1] \wedge P(x)]$
'an identity function on properties, defined if the input property has at most one satisfier.' Coppock & Beaver (2014)

▷ Following Zamparelli (1995) and Cheng, Heycock & Zamparelli (2017), I suggest that *definiteness* corresponds to WeakDP (=wDP), whereas *determinacy* is syntactically encoded *via* StrongDP (=sDP)

2.2 Referentiality in PA superlatives

▷ To show that there is a morphological and semantic mismatch, I probe the ability of a DP to refer to an individual, using a VP-anaphor so (Coppock & Beaver 2014, 2015)

▷ VP-anaphor so should be interpreted with reference to a particular individual picked out by the superlative description

▷ **Predictions of the *so*-anaphora test:**

- If the DP is determinate (referential), the continuation with *nafs* 'same' is felicitous
- If the DP is indeterminate (non-referential), the continuation with *nafs* 'same' is infelicitous

▷ Starting with the positive:

(6) a. *saːra baka bedha etʃuf* *et-temθːal el-maʃhur*. *w-adːam*
Sarah was want.IMPV see.3SG.IMPV the-statue.**3SGM** the-famous.**3SGM** and-Adam
barðˤa. la-heð saːra w-aːdam baka bedhen jeʃufu nafs etamaːθil
so. therefore Sarah and-Adam were want see.3PL.IMPV same statues (Polydefinite Pos.)
'Sarah wanted to see the famous statue, and so did Adam. Therefore, Sarah and Adam wanted to see the same statues.'

b. #*saːra baka bedha etʃuf* *temθːal maʃhur*. *w-adːam barðˤa.*
Sarah was want.IMPV see.3SG.IMPV statue.**3SGM** famous.**3SGM** and-Adam so.
la-heð saːra w-aːdam baka bedhen jeʃufu nafs etamaːθil
Therefore Sarah and-Adam were want see.3PL.IMPV same statues (Bare Pos.)
'Sarah wanted to see a famous statue, and so did Adam. Therefore, Sarah and Adam wanted to see the same statues.

⇒ The polydefinite positive is felicitous, whereas the bare positive is not

▷ The prediction for superlative is that the *bare* superlative is felictious, whereas the *polydefinite* superlative is not:

(7) a. *saːra baka bedha etʃuf* *aʃhar temθːal*. *w-adːam barðˤa. la-heð*
Sarah was want.IMPV see.3SG.IMPV famous.ER statue and-Adam so. therefore
saːra w-aːdam baka bedhen jeʃufu nafs etamaːθil
Sarah and-Adam were want see.3PL.IMPV same statues
'Sarah wanted to see the most famous statue, and so did Adam. Therefore, Sarah and Adam wanted to see the same statues.' (Bare Sup.)

b. #*saːra baka bedha etʃuf* *ettemθːal el-aʃhar*. *w-adːam barðˤa.*
Sarah WAS want.IMPV see.3SG.IMPV the-statue the-famous.ER and-Adam so.
la-heð saːra w-aːdam baka bedhen jeʃufu nafs etamaːθil
Therefore, Sarah and-Adam were want see.3PL.IMPV same statues (Polydefinite Sup.)

⇒ The DP in the *bare* superlative picks out an individual, whereas the DP in the *polydefinite* superlative does not

2.3 Interim Summary

▷ **Takeaway**: Morphological definiteness ≠ semantic definiteness. The bare superlative is semantically definite and determinate despite optional *el-* 'the'. The polydefinite superlative is indeterminate despite overt *el* 'the'.

3 Evidence for a Superlative–Comparative Split

▷ I argue for the existence of the Superlative-Comparative Split (Stateva 2003, Heim 1999):

▷ I present two arguments that motivate the Superlative-Comparative Split

- Ability (or the lack of) to admit a standard clause
- Ability (or the lack of) to take a differential phrase

3.1 Diagnostic 1: Clausal Standard

▷ English comparatives can take clausal standards, giving rise to a relative reading

(8) Mary climbed **a** high**er** mountain **than anyone else did**

⇒ (9) gives rise to a reading similar to the one below:

(9) Mary climbed **the** high**est** mountain **among her friends**

▷ Embedding a standard clause such as *than the others/anyone else did*:

(10) a. **jasmin ʃarat (el)-**__**ayla**__ __**baskalet**__ *men ma ʃara el-baki*
Yasmine bought expensive.ER bike from COMP bought the-others
'Yasmine bought the most expensive bike than the others bought'

b. *jasmin ʃarat* __*el-baskalet el-ayla*__ *men ma ʃara el-baki*
Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive.ER from COMP bought the-others
'Yasmine bought a more expensive bike than the others bought.'

⇒ The adjective in the *bare* superlative cannot take a standard clause

▷ The adjective in the *polydefinite* superlative can, yielding a relative reading through the combination of a comparative and a standard clause

3.2 Diagnostic 2: Differential Phrases

▷ Differential phrases such as *$1000, 10 cm tall* are possible with comparatives but ungrammatical with superlatives:

(11) a. *Mary climbed the highest 100 meter mountain
b. Mary climbed a mountain 100 meters higher than Tariq did

▷ Applying the test to the *bare* superlative and *polydefinite* superlative

(12) a. **jasmin ʃarat (el)-**__**ayla**__ *baskalet (b-ʔalf dular)*
Yasmine bought (the)-expensive.ER bike in-$1000
Literal: 'Yasmine bought the $1000 most expensive bike .'
b. *jasmin ʃarat* __*el-baskalet el-ayla*__ *(b-ʔalf dular)*
Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive.ER in-$1000
Literal: 'Yasmine bought a bike $1000 more expensive.'

⇒ The *bare* superlative cannot combine with a differential phrase
⇒ In contrast, the *polydefinite* superlative can take a differential phrase

3.3 Interim Summary

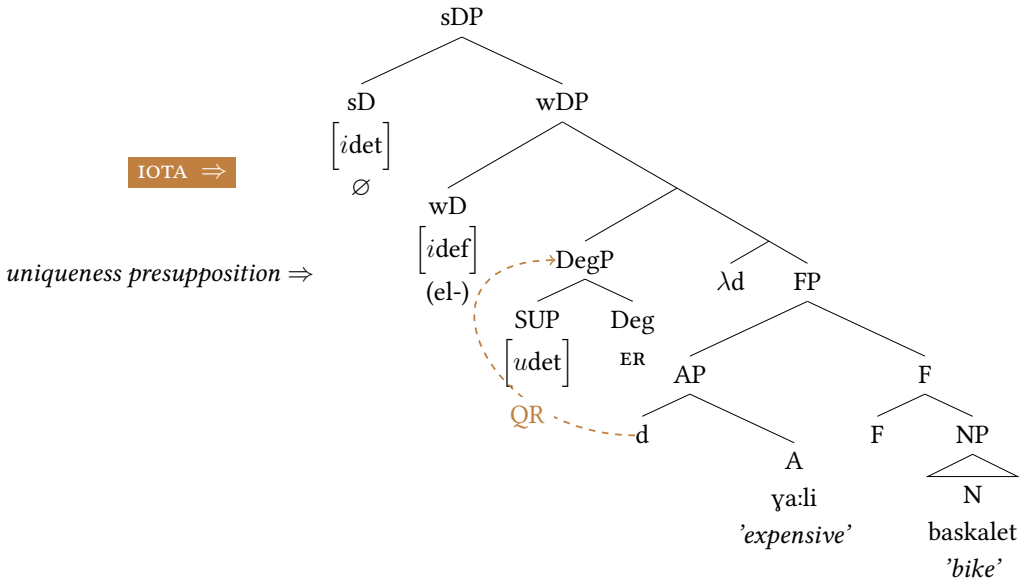
	Structure	Reading	DP type	Projection
bare superlative	superlative	absolute	referential	sDP
polydefinite superlative	comparative	relative	non-referential	wDP

Table 1: Morphosyntax and semantics of PA superlatives

4 Bare: Syntax and Semantics

▷ **Generalization:** SUP+ER always co-occurs with sDP and yields an absolute reading

(13) *bare* superlative LF:



1. The head of sDP bears a feature *i*det, which at LF, introduces an IOTA
   - This blocks the relative reading: the obligatory sDP layer keeps the comparison DP-internal, ruling out sentential scope for Sup-ER
2. The head of wD, which is optionally overt, brings a uniqueness presupposition
3. The DegP undergoes QR
4. The DegP is composed of a covert SUP with an *udet* in Spec, and a three-place ER
   - $[\![\text{ER}]\!] = \lambda z.\lambda G.\lambda b.MAX(\lambda d.G(d)(b)) > MAX(\lambda d'.G(d')(z))$
   - $[\![\text{SUP}]\!] = \lambda R_{e,det,et}.\lambda A.\lambda x.\forall y[y \neq x \rightarrow R(y)(A)(x)]$
   - $[\![\text{DegP}]\!] = \lambda A.\lambda x.\forall y[y \neq x \rightarrow MAX(\lambda d.G(d)(x)) > MAX(\lambda d'.G(d')(y))$

▷ We end up with the following denotation for the sDP:[3]

$[\![\text{sDP}]\!] = \iota x.\,[\partial[|\text{bike}(x) \;\&\; \mu_{\text{COST}}(x) \geq d'|] \leq 1] \;\&\; \forall y[y \neq x \rightarrow \text{MAX}(\lambda d'.\,\text{bike}(x) \;\&\; \mu_{\text{COST}}(x) \geq d') > \text{MAX}(\lambda d''.\,\text{bike}(y) \;\&\; \mu_{\text{COST}}(y) \geq d'')]$

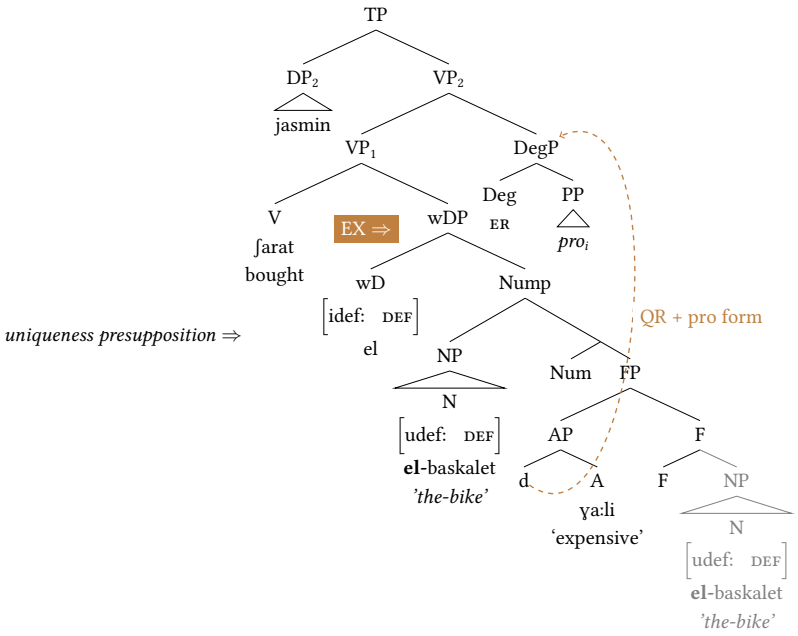
[3]For a full derivation, see Appendix

5 Polydefinite: Syntax and Semantics

▷ The *polydefinite* superlative is analyzed as a phrasal comparative on a wide reading:

(14) *jasmin ʃarat el-baskalet el-ayla men el-baki*
Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive.ER from the-rest
'Yasmine bought a bike more expensive than the rest of her friends bought (Wide Reading).'
#'Yasmine bought a bike more expensive than the rest of the bikes (Narrow reading)'

(15) *polydefinite* superlative LF :



1. The DP within *polydefinite* superlative has a wDP as the topmost layer, introducing a uniqueness presupposition
2. The DegP undergoes QR targeting a sentential level
3. The argument of ER is a *pro*, which receives its value via an assignment function relative to a context
   - $[\![\text{pro}_i]\!]^g = g(i)$:
   - e.g. in Context 1: {Ahmad ⊕ Lina ⊕ Mariam}
   - e.g. in Context 2= {Ali ⊕ Amir ⊕ Haneen}

$[\![\text{TP}]\!] = 1$ iff $\text{MAX}(\lambda d.\, \exists z[\text{bought}(\text{j}, z) \;\&\; [\partial[|\text{bike}(z) \;\&\; \mu_{\text{COST}}(z) \geq d| \leq 1] \;\&\; \text{bike}(z) \;\&\; \mu_{\text{COST}}(z) \geq d]) > \text{MAX}(\lambda d'.\, \exists y[\text{bought}(g(i), y) \;\&\; \text{bike}(y) \;\&\; \mu_{\text{COST}}(y) \geq d'])$

6 Conclusion

▷ PA disambiguates the well-known superlative ambiguity through two distinct morphosyntactic structures, with consequences for both semantics and definiteness marking.

Main findings:

- *bare* superlative is a true superlative with only an absolute reading
  - cannot embed a clausal standard
  - cannot take a differential phrase
  - DP is definite and determinate (referential); sDP + wDP
- *polydefinite* superlative = phrasal comparative with an anaphoric plural standard with only a relative reading
  - embeds clausal standards
  - admits differential phrases
  - DP is definite but indeterminate (non-referential); wDP only

▷ **Broader implications:**

- Morphological definiteness ≠ semantic definiteness: *el-* does not uniformly contribute determinacy
- The absolute/relative split in PA is structural, not a matter of context-dependency

▷ **Next steps:**

- A full compositional account of how the pro form standard is resolved (free variable vs. focus-alternatives)
- Extension to other varieties of Arabic, where the superlatives work differently Hallman (2016, 2022) and Abu Helal (2022)
- Independent diagnostics for the wDP/sDP distinction beyond the superlative domain

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Roumyana Pancheva for her ongoing support and guidance throughout this project. I thank Ivy Sichel, Nora Boneh, and Mia Gong for discussing the syntactic side of this project at various stages, Peter Hallman for discussing some of the semantic aspects, and Jungu Kang for his feedback. I am indebted to the eight native speakers who provided judgments, and especially to the two who continue to do so. I also thank the S-Circle audience for their feedback on an earlier version of this work, as well as Ryan Bennett and participants in Ling 290 for their valuable discussion and comments.

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A Empirical Arguments for disambiguation

A.1 Contexts embedding

(16) Absolute: Yasmine walks into a dealership to buy a car. She can choose between four cars: a Kia costing 100,000 NIS, a Toyota costing 200,000 NIS, a Nissan costing 300,000 NIS, and *a Mercedes costing 500,000 NIS*. After looking around, she buys the Mercedes.

a. *ja:smin ʃarat ayla sajjara*
Yasmine bought expensive.**er** car

b. *ja:smin ʃarat el-ayla sajjara*
Yasmine bought the-expensive.**er** car

c. #*ja:smin ʃarat essajjara el-ayla*
Yasmine bought **the**.car **the**-expensive.**er**

(17) Relative: Yasmine and her friends went into a dealership. They could choose between four cars: a Kia costing 100,000 NIS, a Toyota costing 200,000 NIS, a Nissan costing 300,000 NIS, and a Mercedes costing 500,000 NIS. *No one could afford the Mercedes.* Yasmine bought the Nissan, Dalia the Toyota, and Paula the Kia.

a. #*jas:min ʃarat ayla sajjara*
Yasmine bought expensive.**er** car

b. #*ja:smin ʃarat el-ayla sajjara*
Yasmine bought the-expensive.**er** car

c. *ja:smin ʃarat essajjara el-ayla*
Yasmine bought **the**.car **the**-expensive.**er**

A.2 Heim's Negation test

▷ The *bare* superlative is ruled out because the continuation is nonsensical, whereas the continuation is fine with the *polydefinite* superlative

A.3 Farkas and Kiss

▷ Following Farkas & Kiss (2000), embedding the superlative in a DP and answering with *nobody* is only felicitous answer to a question under an absolute reading, but not a relative reading

(18) *who climbed the highest mountain?*

a. who climbed Mt. Everest — Absolute

b. Who climbed a mountain that was higher than what anybody else climbed? — Relative

⇒ Nobody is a felicitous answer to the question in a, but not in b

▷ Applying to Arabic:

(19) a. *A: min ʃara ayla baskalet*
who bought expensive.ER bike

b. *B: maħada*
nobody

(20) a. *A: min ʃara el-baskalet el-ayla*
who bought the-bike the-expensive.ER

b. *B: maħada*
nobody

A.4 Focus Sensitive Markers

▷ Focus-sensitive markers such as *only* and *even* (Alexiadou, Iatriduo, & Pancheva, ms.)

(21) Even Anna climbed the highest mountain

⇒ Only the absolute reading is available. The relative reading does not allow other climbers

(22) a. *ħatta jasmin ʃarat ayla baskalet*
even Yasmine bought expensive.ER bike
'Even Yasmine bought the most expensive bike'

b. ??*ħatta jasmin ʃarat el-baskalet el-ayla*
even Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive.ER
'Even Yasmine bought the most expensive bike'

▷ The contrast shows that the *bare* superlative yileds an absolute reading, whereas the *polydefinite* superlative does not.

B Full Compositional Derivations

▷ an almost step-by-step derivation for the *bare* superlative:

1. $[\![\text{NP}]\!] = [\![\text{F}]\!] = \lambda j.bike(j)$
2. $[\![\textit{expensive}]\!](d) = [\![\text{AP}]\!] = \lambda z.\mu_{\text{COST}}(z) \geq d$ FA
3. $[\![\text{FP}]\!] = \lambda k.bike(k)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(k) \geq d$ Predicate Modification
4. $\lambda d.\ [\![\text{FP}]\!] = \lambda d.\lambda k.bike(k)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(k) \geq d$ λ-abstraction
5. $[\![\text{Deg}]\!](\lambda d.\ [\![\text{FP}]\!]) = \lambda x.\forall y[y \neq x \rightarrow MAX(\lambda d'.bike(x)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(x) \geq d') > MAX(\lambda d''.bike(y)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(y) \geq d'')$ FA, lexicon 4 for Deg
6. $[\![\text{wDP}]\!] = \lambda x.[\partial[|\text{bike}(z)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(z) \geq d| \leq 1]$ & $\forall y[y \neq x \rightarrow MAX(\lambda d'.bike(x)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(x) \geq d') > MAX(\lambda d''.bike(y)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(y) \geq d'')$
7. $[\![\text{sDP}]\!] = \iota x.\forall y[y \neq x \rightarrow MAX(\lambda d'.bike(x)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(x) \geq d') > MAX(\lambda d''.bike(y)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(y) \geq d'')$ IOTA and uniqueness presupposition from wDP

▷ An almost step-by-step derivation for the *polydefinite* superlative:

1. $[\![\text{deg}]\!] = \lambda y.\lambda G.\lambda z.MAX(\lambda d.G(d)(z)) > MAX(\lambda d'.G(d')(y))$
2. $[\![\text{pro}_i]\!]^g = \text{g(i)}$ T&P rule
3. $[\![\text{DegP}]\!] = \lambda G.\lambda z.MAX(\lambda d.G(d)(z)) > MAX(\lambda d'.G(d')(g(i)))$ FA
4. $[\![\text{wDP}]\!] = \lambda y.\partial[|\text{bike}(z)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(z) \geq d| \leq 1]$ & $bike(y)$ & $\mu_{cost}(y) \geq d$
5. $[\![\text{V}]\!] = \lambda x.\lambda b.bought(b, x)$
6. $[\![\text{VP1}]\!] = \lambda d.\lambda b.\exists x[bought(b, x)$ & $bike(x)$ & $\mu_{cost}(x) \geq d]$ λ abstraction, restrict, $\exists$x
7. $[\![\text{VP2}]\!] = \lambda z.MAX(\lambda d.\lambda.d.\lambda b.\exists x[bought(b, x)$ & $bike(x)$ & $\mu_{cost}(g(i)) \geq d](d)(z)) >$

   $MAX(\lambda d'.\lambda.d.\lambda b.\exists x[bought(b, x)$ & $bike(x)$ & $\mu_{cost}(x) \geq d](d')(g(i)))$
8. $[\![\text{VP2}]\!] = \lambda z.MAX(\lambda d.\exists x[bought(z, x)$ & $bike(x)$ & $\mu_{cost}(x) \geq d] >$
   $MAX(\lambda d'.\exists x[bought(g(i), x)$ & $bike(x)$ & $\mu_{cost}(x) \geq d'])$
9. $[\![\text{DP}]\!] = \text{j}$
10. $[\![\text{TP}]\!] = 1$ iff MAX$(\lambda d.\ \exists z[\text{bought(j}, z)$ & $[\partial[|\text{bike}(z)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(z) \geq d| \leq 1]$ & $\text{bike}(z)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(z) \geq d])$ > MAX$(\lambda d'.\ \exists y[\text{bought}(g(i), y)$ & $\text{bike}(y)$ & $\mu_{\text{COST}}(y) \geq d'])$

C Bare Comparative and Polydefinite comparative: Definiteness matters

(23) CONTEXT: Yasmine's friends, Ahmad, Lina, and Mariam, each bought one bike. Yasmine bought three bikes. $500, $600, $700 all more expensive than what the others bought.

a. #*jasmin ʃarat* ***el-baskalet el-ayla***
Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive.ER
'(of all the relevant people) Yasmine bought the most expensive bike.' (Polydefinite)

b. *jasmin ʃarat* ***baskalet ayla***
Yasmine bought bike expensive.ER
'(of all the relevant people) Yasmine bought a more expensive bike.' (Bare Comparative)

(24) CONTEXT: Yasmine and her friends, Ahmad, Lina, and Mariam, each bought one bike. Ahmad bought a $200 bike, Lina bought a $300 bike, and Mariam bought a $250 bike. Yasmine bought a $700 bike.

a. *jasmin ʃarat* ***el-baskalet el-ayla***
Yasmine bought the-bike the-expensive.ER
'(of all the relevant people) Yasmine bought the most expensive bike.' (Polydefinite)

b. #*jasmin ʃarat* ***baskalet ayla***
Yasmine bought bike expensive.ER
'(of all the relevant people) Yasmine bought a more expensive bike.' (Bare Comparative)

▷ The *polydefinite* superlative is felicitous only when there is at most one satisfier of the uniqueness presupposition

D Superlatives in copular clauses

▷ Both superlatives appear in copular clauses: the *bare* superlative is restricted to specificational/equative copulas, while the *polydefinite* superlative appears in both predicative and specificational/equative copulas

▷ Arabic distinguishes between predicative and non-predicative copular clauses with an overt vs. covert pronominal copula[4]

(25) a. *jasmin *(hi) emʕalma*
Yasmine teacher
'Yasmine is a teacher.'

b. *jasmin (*hi) l-emʕalma*
Yasmine Pron.Cop the-teacher
'Yasmine is the teacher.'

▷ Overt copula gives rise to an equative copular clause

(26) *bare* superlative

a. **jasmin aʔhsan emʕalma*
Yasmine better teacher
'Yasmine is the best teacher'

b. *jasmin hi aʔhsan emʕalma*
Yasmine Pron.Cop better teacher
'Yasmine is the best teacher'

⇒ The pronominal copula has to be overt with the *bare* superlative

(27) *polydefinite* superlative

a. *jasmin l-emʕalma l-aʔhsan*
Yasmine the-teacher the-better
'Yasmine is the best teacher'

b. *jasmin hi l-emʕalma l-aʔhsan*
Yasmine Pron.Cop the-teacher the-better
'Yasmine is the best teacher'

⇒ (27-a) is felicitous as a predicative copula, and (27-b) is also felicitous as an equative copula. This suggests that an sDP layer can be added to the *polydefinite* superlative, but a layer cannot be removed from the *bare* superlative

[4]Based on discussion with Ur Shlonsky, Isabelle Roy, Maris Camilleri, Lina Choueiri, and Faruk Akkuş.