

## On Superlatives

During a recent soccer match at the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar, one of the commentators remarked that Lionel Messi's brilliant goal against Australia helped Argentina enter the quarterfinals. This phrasing has led me to inquire into the meaning of the word "brilliant" and other similar superlatives –without intending herein to disparage its use to describe the genius of scientists like Stephen Hawking or Albert Einstein.

The sense of brilliant as "sparkling with light or luster," goes back to the 1680s, in reference to a flat-topped cut invented by Venetian diamond cutter Vincenzo Peruzzi. Others believe that it originated from Vulgar Latin *berillare*, or from Latin *beryllus* "to shine like a beryl." However, the figurative sense of "brilliant" (of wit, intelligence, etc.) dates back to 1779, whereas the figurative sense of "brilliant" as meaning "distinguished by admirable qualities" dates rather from about 1848. \*

Of course, it is obvious that the adjective "brilliant" is as overused as other superlatives such as "awesome," "amazing," etc.; but besides exaggeration, one is tempted to ask: why is greatness compared to shining light? This is another way of asking: why is the reflectivity of one metal better than the opaqueness of another? Or, in other words, why is gold better than iron? Aside from the fact that gold does not rust –which makes it ideal as a medium of exchange– its lustre, as well as that of silver, has been associated since ancient times with supernatural qualities. We know that the earliest civilizations dressed their kings and queens in gold, silver and precious stones to highlight their pretended divinity.

For centuries, poets have written paeans to women's shining eyes or lustrous blond hair, assuming –as most early scientists also did– that light shone from within the soul rather than bounced off physical surfaces. Thus, great artists and musicians were labeled "brilliant" because it was believed that their greatness had the spark of divinity illuminating their works. Similarly, the thinkers and writers of the Age of Enlightenment (in French, *l'Âge des Lumières*) were reputed to guide the modern world out of the Dark Ages of superstition into the Light of Reason.

The aura of metallic luminosity as a symbol of value continues to dazzle us. Even in today's financial markets, investment in gold bullion is preferred even to valuable assets such as pharmaceuticals or robotics. No wonder that some progressive thinkers have satirized this obfuscation. For example, during a celebration of the triumph of the Russian revolution, Lenin jokingly said in 1921 that it might be a good idea to build toilets out of gold, which would serve as a useful reminder of the wastefulness of capitalism. \*\*

Starting in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the luminosity analogy was extended first to Hollywood actors and then to other popular personalities by labelling them "stars." A music album, instead of the word "featuring," would use the word "starring" such-and-such crooner. Even after astronomers proved that some stars are hundreds of times bigger and brighter than our sun, the inflation of human superegos grew even more ridiculous by calling many of these actors and musicians "superstars." And instead of real heroes, we have become used to watching films starring "superheroes" such as Superman and Supergirl.

Alas, our entertainment media have desensitized us to recognize the difference between a real hero (such as a firefighter who enters a burning building to rescue a child) and an actor fighting “supervillains” in glittering tights and golden cape.

As a way to wrap things up, I return to the etymology of the word “superlative,” –being in Latin the past participle of *superfero* (carry over), from *super* (above) and *fero* (bear or carry). So, any African peasant who had once carried her wares over her head was, by definition, **superlative**. \*\*\*

\* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/brilliant>

\*\* <https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=81450&page=1>

\*\*\* <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/superlative>

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