‘Most likely to succeed’: Degree Adverbs
Specifying Probability in Classical Greek

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This paper argues that in Classical Greek a number of degree adverbs (μάλιστα, ἧκιστα, and μᾶλλον, among others) can play a role in specifying the likelihood of potential events, acquiring the meaning ‘most likely’, ‘least likely’, and ‘more likely’, respectively, in certain contexts.

Introduction: adverbs and modal expressions in Classical Greek

Since the role of adverbs, other than the modal ‘particle’ ἄν, in Ancient Greek modal expressions has received little attention in general, I will start with the best-known case of interaction of an adverb with the modal force of the predicate. It is documented in grammars of Ancient Greek that the potential optative (‘it is possible that X’) accompanied by a negation expresses what Gildersleeve calls ‘total negation’, in other words, it should be paraphrased with ‘it is not possible that X’ rather than with ‘it is possible that not-X’. Consider (1), from a speech by the Corinthians at Sparta (Thuc. 1.121.4):

1 B. L. Gildersleeve, Syntax of Classical Greek (New York 1900) §442.

2 The axiom δίς ἐς τὸν αὐτὸν ποταμὸν οὐκ ἢν ἐμβαίης ‘you can’t step into the same river twice’ is perhaps the most generally known example. Here too it is obvious that Heraclitus would not have wanted us to understand, ‘you might possibly not step into the same river twice’. Gildersleeve (§442) and A. Rijksbaron, The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek3 (Chicago 2002) 41, 48 (“emphatic negation”), associate this construction primarily with the aorist, but compare A. Lanski, “Emphatic Negation and the Potential Optative,” Mnemosyne 66 (2013) 777–783.

3 Unless otherwise indicated, examples are from the OCT Thucydides. Translations are taken from the Loeb (C. F. Smith, 1919).

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(1) ὃ γὰρ ἡμεῖς ἔχομεν φύσει ἄγαθόν, ἐκείνοις οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο διδαχὴ.

The excellence that nature has given us cannot become theirs through instruction.

The claim made by the speaker is not that instruction could possibly not yield results; rather, the claim is that instruction could not possibly yield results. Formally, one would analyze the combination of adverb and modal as one in which the adverb has scope over (is hierarchically superior to) the modal.

This phenomenon practically exhausts the discussion of adverbs in modal expressions by the standard reference grammars, with two exceptions. Goodwin, who does not in fact discuss the negative, does mention a further adverb as especially frequent in combination with the modal particle ἂν, namely τάχα ’perhaps’ (Thuc. 1.81.1):

(2) τάχα ἂν τις θαρσοῖ ὅτι τοῖς ὀπλοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ τῷ πλήθει ὑπερ-φέρομεν, ὥστε τὴν γῆν δηοῦν ἐπιφοιτῶντες.

Perhaps some of us are emboldened by our superiority in arms and numbers, which enable us freely to invade and lay waste their territory.

It is understandable that it is only τάχα that was singled out by Goodwin, since the adverb is so frequently found with ἂν in the classical period and τάχα ἂν can even be used as a stand-alone expression.5

Often the adverb ἵσσως is found in combination with τάχα ἂν (6.78.3):

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4 W. W. Goodwin, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb (Philadelphia 1890) §221. In the classical period, the predominant meaning of τάχα is ’perhaps’. I leave τάχα ’quickly’, which barely survives in the classical period (its place having been taken by ταχέως), out of consideration here.

5 Gildersleeve §458; LSJ s.v. τάχα. Since ἂν cannot normally be used in the absence of a verb with which it is construed, this is strong evidence for τάχα ἂν being felt as a fixed combination. Furthermore, in Thucydides we find one example (6.2.4) of τάχα ἂν δὲ, instead of the expected ordering τάχα δ’ ἂν, which again is evidence for the combination being treated as a unit.
καὶ εἰ γνώμη ἁμάρτητι, τοῖς αὐτοῦ κακοῖς ὀλοφυρθεῖς τάχα ἄν ἵσω καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ποτὲ βουληθείν αὐθίς φθονήσαι.

And if he should err in judgment, when he has to lament his own ills he may perhaps some day wish once more to become envious of our good fortune.

While the potential optative can range from requests, to polite assertions of fact, to actual expression that an event expressed by the verb may possibly take place, τάχα explicitly attributes at least some degree of probability to the event.⁶

In the case of the negative, the composite meaning (‘not possible’ vs. ‘possible…that not’) demonstrates the hierarchy of adverb and predicate. As for adverbs meaning ‘perhaps’ (ἵσως or τάχα), these cannot be used to indicate the manner in which a state of affairs takes place; their usage is confined to this same high level of ‘attitudinal disjunct’, that is, they are adverbs which express the speaker’s attitude to the state of affairs.⁷

There is one further comment in Schwyzer-Debrunner, un-accompanied by illustration, which reads, in full, “Der Wahr-scheinlichkeitsgrad kann durch Adverbia wie ἵσως, ep. ῥεῖα näher bestimmt werden.”⁸ In a nutshell, this is the point I want to make in this paper, since this interpretation still seems to be overlooked too often as a possibility. I will argue that there are additional adverbs, namely πλεῖστα, μάλιστα, ἥκιστα, and ἐλάχιστα, that should be interpreted as further specifying the likelihood of the potential event. Unlike τάχα, these adverbs

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⁶ This degree of probability is, however, not clearly specified further by τάχα, as noted in LSJ s.v.: “to express any contingency from a probability to bare possibility.” For an example of the former one might propose Thuc. 1.77.6 (if you Spartans should come to power, you would τάχα become unpopular as well); for an example of the latter, Nicias’s thought in 6.19.2 that he might τάχα change people’s minds by giving a high estimate of troop levels needed for the expedition.


⁸ E. Schwyzer and A. Debrunner, Griechische Grammatik II (Munich 1959) 324.
place the likelihood of events at an extreme: either extremely high, or extremely low.  

But before I turn to the additional adverbs for which I claim this use, I should point out an important distinction between the two adverbs mentioned in Schwyzer-Debrunner. As a result of their meaning ‘perhaps’, the use of ἴσως and τάχα with the potential optative, which is widespread, is unlikely to lead to interpretative difficulty. With ῥεῖα, the situation is different. The English adverb ‘easily’ is most readily associated with manner (an ‘adjunct’) as in, ‘I could easily see the match from my courtside seat’ (answering, ‘how was your view at the French Open?’) but can be used as an attitudinal disjunct as well (‘On clay, I can easily see Djokovic beat Federer’, answering, ‘Do you think he can beat him?’), where the speaker asserts her belief about the odds of Djokovic beating Federer, not about the ease with which the spectator follows the match. In both uses, the adverb ῥεῖα can be translated by the same English word, so while it is potentially ambiguous, nevertheless, like ἴσως and τάχα, it is unlikely to confuse a modern reader. First consider Homer Il. 17.70–71:  

(4) ἐνθά κε ῥεῖα φέροι κλυτὰ τεῦχεα Πανθοίδαν  
     Ἀτρείδης, εἰ μὴ οἱ ἀγάσσατο Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων.  

_Easily then would Atreus’ son have carried off the glorious armor of the son of Panthous, if Phoebus Apollo had not begrudged it him,..._  

My preference is to read this instance along the lines suggested by Schwyzer-Debrunner, with ῥεῖα indicating a high degree of likelihood. One could paraphrase with ‘it could easily have happened

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9 As lower-level adjuncts, the most common use, these adverbs specify the degree to which a predicate holds true, e.g., ‘least trustworthy’, ‘the newspaper people trust most’. Two examples from Thucydides are 1.3.1 δηλοῖ δέ μοι καὶ τόδε τῶν παλαιῶν ὑσθένειαν οὐχ ἤκιστα (specifying δηλοῖ) and 1.10.4 ἐξώ τῶν βασιλέων καὶ τῶν μᾶλλον ἐν τέλει (specifying ἐν τέλει, “most powerful”).  

10 Translations are taken from Wyatt’s revised edition of Murray’s Loeb translation (1999).
that Menelaos…’, indicating that the narrator presents this as a likely scenario before the divine interference of the εἰ μή clause. This seems preferable to an interpretation as a Manner Adjunct, roughly ‘Menelaos would now have carried off the armor with ease’, but the latter interpretation is not impossible.

In (5), on the other hand, where Nestor has asked if the horses he admires were given by a god, Odysseus denies this, but acknowledges that it would be easy for gods to give such a gift, or rather an even better one (Il. 10.556–557):

(5) ῥεῖα θεός γ’ ἑθέλων καὶ ἀμείνονας ἡ περ ὀίδε ὑπὸ καὶ δορήσατ’. ἐπεὶ ἡ πολὺ φέρτεροι εἰσιν.

Easily might a god if he wished bestow even better horses than these, since the gods are mightier far.

In this case, the adverb ‘easily’ is more likely a comment on the ease with which gods can accomplish anything (as in ἤτια μὰλ’ ὡς τε ὑσε, Il. 3.381; θεόι ἤτια ζώοντες, 6.138) rather than on the likelihood of this gift imminently happening.

In later Greek, I would argue that in its classical form, ῥᾳδίως can also be found to express a higher likelihood, as in this statement in Xenophon about Socrates (Mem. 4.4.4):

(6) ἀλλὰ ῥᾳδίως ἂν ἀφεθεῖς ὑπὸ τῶν δικαστῶν, ἐι καὶ μετρίως τι τούτων ἐποίησε, προείλετο μᾶλλον τοῖς νόμοις ἐμμένων ἀπο-

11 On the mood of φέροι and for further references see M. Edwards, The Iliad: A Commentary V (Cambridge 1990) 70. Chantraine (quoted by Edwards) translates “on eût vu…” (one could have seen…) which makes explicit that we should read this as authorial comment by the narrator.

12 As a further test, one can try to substitute ‘certainly’ for ‘easily’ and consider whether the sense of the sentence fundamentally changes as a result. I would argue that ‘certainly’ fits better in (4) and (6) than in (5). This test is inspired by Donatus’ comment on Ter. Andr. 720, cited in TLL s.v. facilis (VI.1 70.76–77), ‘facile adverbium confirmantis est, id est ‘liquido’ et ‘manifesto’, veteres ‘facile’ dicebant pro ‘certo’. The TLL itself describes this use of the adverb facile as “magis de ‘opinione’, fere i. q. ‘certo’, ‘sine dubio.’” Quirk et al., Comprehensive Grammar 589, compare ‘easily’ in modal expressions with ‘well’: ‘They might easily have been arrested’ ≈ ‘They might well have been arrested’.
θανεῖν.

but even though he could easily have been acquitted by the jury, if only he had made even a slight compromise, he preferred to be true to the laws and die.

As was the case with ῥεῖα in (4), the adverb ‘easily’ does not describe the manner in which the event of acquitting is carried out, but the likelihood of it happening.

In conclusion to this section, a quick note on the position of the adverbs is perhaps in order. Instances (4) through (6), in which I argue for a different status of the adverbs, as adjunct (5) or as disjunct ((4) and (6)), all feature the adverbs at the beginning or as close to the beginning of the clause as they can be following a Setting (ἐνθά) or connector (ἀλλά). Whereas there is a strong tendency in English for style disjuncts (‘frankly’, ‘briefly’) to be placed at the periphery of the sentence, and one might see this as a direct reflection of the wide semantic scope of these adverbs, this tendency is less strong for attitudinal disjuncts (compare the examples in n.12). For the adverbs studied below, I see insufficient evidence as yet that adjunct versus disjunct status matters to their position in the clause. This lack of differentiation may simply be due to the fact that superlatives generally will present highly salient information, and are therefore likely to appear in preverbal Focus position, which will often be clause-initial.¹³

μάλιστα, πλεῖστα, ἕκιστα, ἐλάχιστα as expressions of likelihood

Having discussed the sparse references in the literature to these expressions of probability, I now turn to further adverbs which, like ῥεῖα and ῥᾳδίως, can play a variety of roles in clauses, but which, unlike these, must be translated differently depending on their role in the clause. Translators and com-

mentators have often overlooked that a number of quite frequent adverbs can be used to express a very high or low degree of likelihood.

I will primarily discuss instances from Thucydides' *Histories*, in which I first noticed the phenomenon, but this is by no means in order to claim that this construction is exclusively Thucydidean. It is, however, a staple of Thucydidean discourse to speculate about an opponent’s strategy and it is such contexts where, I argue, we can see these adverbs used to specify very high or very low probability. Since I have been able to find as little discussion in commentaries as in the reference grammars, translations are practically my only evidence for earlier scholars' interpretations, and I will therefore quote from these translations quite extensively. My aim in doing so is twofold: obviously, translations that do use expressions of likelihood support the present argument; on the other hand, translations that do not use such expressions are often quite unsatisfactory in their treatment of the adverbs in question, showing, one hopes, that the present paper is filling a lacuna in the scholarship. In any case, the presence of third-party translations should make it easier for readers to make up their own minds.

The adverbs I will concentrate on are μάλιστα and πλεῖστα to express high likelihood, and ἥκιστα and ἐλάχιστα to express low likelihood; I will include a few examples of the comparatives μᾶλλον and ἥσσον in the notes. In contrast to τάχα and ἱσως, these adverbs are all quite frequent in Thucydides, and they are found in many more contexts than statements of potential events. As a heuristic for finding such statements, I have looked for combinations of the adverbs with ἄν.\(^{14}\) To be sure, the modal particle ἄν is not a necessary ingredient for

\(^{14}\) Since the presence of ἄν is indeed only a heuristic, one would expect this use of the adverbs to extend beyond this particular environment. Indeed, I would argue that despite the absence of explicit modal expression Hdt. 8.136.2 τοὺς γὰρ Ἀθηναίους οὕτω ἐδόκεε μάλιστα προσκτήσεσθαι is also best translated as “he thought he would be *most likely* to win over the Athenians in this way.”
statements of potential or likely events. Likelihood can be expressed lexically by means of εἰκός, for instance, or it can be left implicit. In Aristotle’s Rhetoric, we find statements not containing explicit modals explained by statements that do contain these, as at 1397b12–13:15

\[ \text{ἄλλος ἐκ τοῦ µᾶλλον καὶ ἢττον, οἷον “ei µηδ’ οἱ θεοὶ πάντα ἱσασιν, σχολῇ οἱ γε ἀνθρωποι”} \text{. τούτο γάρ ἐστιν “ei ὃ µᾶλλον ὁν υπάρχου µή υπάρχει, δήλον ὃι οὐδ’ ὃ ήττον”. τὸ δ’ ὅτι τοὺς πλησίουν τύπτει ὃς γε καὶ τὸν πατέρα ἐκ τοῦ “ei τὸ ἢττον µᾶλλον ὑπάρχει, καὶ τὸ µᾶλλον υπάρχει” τοὺς γὰρ πατέρας ἢττον τύπτουσιν ἢ τοὺς πλησίουν.} \]

Another topic is derived from the more and less. For instance, if not even the gods know everything, hardly can men; for this amounts to saying that if a predicate, which is more probably affirmable of one thing, does not belong to it, it is clear that it does not belong to another of which it is less probably affirmable. And to say that a man who beats his father also beats his neighbors, is an instance of the rule that, if the less exists, the more also exists. For people are less likely to hit their father than their neighbors.

Despite the absence of explicit modals, we can easily understand them following an adverb such as σχολῇ ‘scarcely’; similarly, I translate ἢττον τύπτουσιν with ‘are less likely to hit’, not ‘hit less’, despite the indicative mood.

Turning, however, to the collocations with ἀν now, only about one in fifteen occurrences of µάλιστα in Thucydides co-occurs with ἀν within a clause that is either a potential optative, or an infinitive in indirect statement. In the table below, I give the number of occurrences of these words (and of τάχα)16 and

\[ \text{15 The last sentence of this passage is included in the Ross’s OCT edition, but not found in all mss. The translation of the passage up to that point is that of the Loeb edition, by J. H. Freese (1926).} \]

\[ \text{16 To the few instances of τάχα could be added ταχύ in 6.17.4. The one instance in which τάχα is not accompanied by ἀν (8.94) does not speculate about an eventuality but about the reason for an action that actually took place: τάχα µὲν τι καὶ ἀπὸ ἕνωσιἀµένου λόγου, “perhaps because of a prior arrangement.”} \]

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for the sake of comparison) immediately adjacent to ἀν, separated at most by δὲ or γὰρ, as well as their total number of occurrences. These are the instances where the two words will most likely be felt as a unit. There are also instances of further separation, in which I would nevertheless argue for a likelihood interpretation, but most examples where I would argue for a likelihood interpretation have immediate adjacency.¹⁷

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverb</th>
<th>Adverb + ἀν</th>
<th>Total occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>τάχα</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἵσως</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>πλείστα</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>μάλιστα</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>316</td>
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<tr>
<td>ἶκιστα</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>ἐλάχιστα</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>μᾶλλον</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἱσσον</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
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It will be immediately apparent that the proposed interpretation will hold for only a small minority of the total instances of use of these adverbs, and the question arises how one would go about demonstrating that other possible translations should be discarded. Clearly, it would be necessary to show that more frequent interpretations such as degree expressions at the level of the predicate itself (‘they were most fortunate’), or internal object interpretations (‘they won the fewest victories’) are excluded. In making the case, then, I will focus on clauses in which degree expressions or internal objects are incompatible.

¹⁷ Giving an ‘exact’ count is not as straightforward as it may seem. There is in fact only one case of ἵσως ἀν, in Thuc. 2.20.2. The other three counted also feature τάχα, as in τάχ’ ἀν ἵσως. Then, beyond the four passages counted, two more that feature ἵσως and ἀν in the same sentence have not been counted because they are not immediately adjacent: 1.82.3 ἵσως … μᾶλλον ἀν ἐκκολευν and 6.11.3 κἂν ἐλθουν ἵσως. In sum, six out of ten instances of ἵσως are found within the same clause as ἀν, while one could argue that ἵσως ἀν functions as a unit only once.
with the predicate, and on those where other Manner expressions or internal objects are present. First, however, I will illustrate the conundrum one faces when the particular predicate is compatible with various interpretations of the adverb.

In fact, the title of this paper is my proposed translation of a phrase that Thucydides uses four times in all: πλεῖστ’ ἂν ὀρθοῖ(ν)το. Below is the first occurrence of the phrase in the Histories (3.30.4), and the various translations by Smith (Loeb, 1919–1923), Warner (Penguin, 1954), and Crawley (Everyman’s Library, 1874):

(7) καὶ μὴ ἀποκνήσωμεν τὸν κίνδυνον, νομίσαντες οὐκ ἄλλο τι εἶναι τὸ κενὸν τοῦ πολέμου ἢ τὸ τοιοῦτον, ὃ εἰ τις στρατηγὸς ἐν τε αὐτῷ φυλάσσοιτο καὶ τοῖς πολεμίοις ἐνορῶν ἐπιχειροῖ, πλεῖστ’ ἂν ὀρθοῖτο.

Let us not shrink from the danger, remembering that the element of surprise in warfare is precisely of this nature. And if a general guards against such surprises in his own case, and, whenever he sees an opportunity to employ them in the case of the enemy, makes the attempt, he will win the greatest success (Smith)

… a good general is the one who … (Warner)

… is what makes a successful general (Crawley)

For πλεῖστα, an interpretation as internal object is not impossible here. The use of the present tense (φυλάσσοιτο, ἐπιχειροῖ, ὀρθοῖτο) suggests a habitual attitude which can lead to success on multiple occasions. A translation as ‘greatest success’, however, is problematic, since ὀρθόω, unlike English ‘prosper’ or ‘succeed’, is not compatible with degree expressions (one stays upright, or, in the negative, one fails to do so). All four instances of the phrase (repeated at 3.42.4, 5.9.4, and 5.111.4) allow for an interpretation of πλεῖστ’ ἂν ὀρθοῖτο as ‘would be successful on most occasions’.¹⁸ I would argue, however, that they would also lend themselves to an interpretation as ‘would be

¹⁸ A similar argument can be made for 3.37.4, ὀρθοῦνται τὰ πλεῖο, again in a generalizing context, with frequency and probability two sides of the same coin. See below.

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most likely to succeed’. The following passage is of interest, in that the antonym ἐλάχιστα follows in the next sentence, and one of the translators, Smith, in fact adopts an interpretation of this second adverb as an expression of likelihood.19 However, it will be seen that Crawley (‘fewer blunders’) follows Classen-Steup’s lead in construing ἐλάχιστα as the internal object of ἁμαρτάνειν, which is equally defensible. 3.42.4:

(8) καὶ πλεῖστ’ ἄν ὀρθοῖτο ἀδυνάτους λέγειν ἐξουσία τοὺς τοιούτους τῶν πολίτων ἐλάχιστα γὰρ ἄν ἔσησθεν ἁμαρτάνειν.

Indeed, [the city] would prosper most if its citizens of this stamp had no eloquence at all, for then the people would be least likely to blunder through their influence (Smith).

Questions of translations aside, however, I should point out that in the case of a description of repeated, or repeatable, situations, the distinction between a frequency expression and a likelihood expression is really a distinction without a difference: ‘will succeed at nine out of ten occasions’ is equivalent to ‘is ninety percent likely to succeed’. 20

20 A further quite similar example is in 6.9.2, νομίζων ὅμως ἁγιάθνι πολέμων εἶναι ὅσ τι καὶ τοῦ σώματος τι καὶ τῆς οὐσίας προνοήσαν μᾶλλον γὰρ ἄν τοιούτος καὶ τὰ τῆς πόλεως δι᾽ ἔστων βούλιοτο ὀρθοῦσθαι.
In order to make the case, then, that an expression of likelihood is indeed a good reading for which support can be found elsewhere in Thucydides, the following discussion will consider examples in which both a degree expression and an internal object seem problematic, due to the semantics of the verb or the presence of other internal objects or degree expressions in the sentence.

Compatibility of the adverb with the predicate

In (9), the potential statement happens to be in indirect discourse (ἡγούµενοι ... μάλιστα' ἀν φέρεσθαι), but this is immaterial to the argument that the adverb μάλιστα in this case expresses a high degree of likelihood that the event will come to pass (3.53.1):

(9) τὴν μὲν παράδοσιν τῆς πόλεως, ὦ Λακεδαιμόνιοι, πιστεύσαντες ὑµῖν ἑποιησάμεθα, οὐ τοιάνδε δίκην οἰόµενοι ὑφέξειν, νοµισµένοι δὲ τινα ἑσσθαι, καὶ ἐν δικασταίς οὐκ ἀν ἅλλας δεξάµενοι, ὦσπερ καὶ ἑσµέν, γενέσθαι ἡ ὑµῖν, ἡγούµενοι τὸ ἵσον μάλιστα' ἀν φέρεσθαι.

When we surrendered our city, Lacedaemonians, trusting in your good faith, we had no thought that we should have to undergo a trial like this, but supposed it would be a more regular procedure; and when we consented to be on trial before you, and you alone as judges, as we now are, we believed that we should be most likely to obtain fair treatment (Smith).

The presence of the definite τὸ ἵσον ‘justice’ makes it hard to interpret μάλιστα in the normal sense of ‘to the highest degree’. Smith as well as Crawley and Warner translate μάλιστα with ‘most likely’. Classen-Steup do not offer comment on μάλιστα, but translate with ‘sicherlich’, ‘certainly’. This, however, obscures the fact that comparison still plays a role: The Spartans, compared to others, are considered most likely to do the right thing.

22 Unlike πλείστα, of course, μάλιστα can only be an adverb, so that the internal object interpretation is excluded as well.

Demosthenes offers a parallel, in which the verb and its complement, 'obtain the peace treaty', again would not seem to be compatible with an expression of degree or extent (Dem. 19.317):

(10) συνέγραψε δ’ ἐπιστολήν ὡς ύμᾶς, ἃ μάλιστ’ ἂν ὅρετο τῆς εἰρήνης τυχεῖν.

He [Philip] then composed a letter to you, as the best means of obtaining the peace he desired (transl. Vince, Loeb 1926).

The translator appears to construe μάλιστα closely with the relative pronoun ("the best means"), but what this means is rather unclear. Instead, I propose: "a letter, with which he thought he was most likely to obtain the peace treaty."

A fairly close parallel is offered by clauses with the phrasing οὗτος ἃν μάλιστα, as in (11), again from Demosthenes. An adoption is deemed most likely to lead to the preservation of a family (43.12):

(11) ἡγούμενος, ὃ ἄνδρες δικασταί, ἐκ τῶν ὑπολοίπων τούτων εἶναι ἕκαστῳ οἰκεῖότατον, καὶ οὗτος ἃν μάλιστα τὸν οἶκον τὸν ἐαυτῶν διασώζεσθαι καὶ οὐκ ἂν ἐξερημωθῆναι.

for he thought, men of the jury, that of his surviving relatives this boy was nearest to him, and that in this way their house would be preserved and kept from extinction (Vince).

While the translator inserts ‘best’, I believe διασώζεσθαι is another instance of a verb that is not readily compatible with degree expressions: survival is what is at stake here. The full string used here, οὗτος ἃν μάλιστα, is a frequent collocation.

24 One of the things ‘the best means’ could mean is the means most likely to be successful (as in, ‘email is the best way to reach me’ is ‘you are most likely to reach me if you use email’). But it is presumably not the medium, but the content that has been selected for its persuasiveness.

25 Cf. Lys. 2.1, διὰ τούτῳ καὶ ἡ πόλις μοι δοκεῖ, προνοούμενη τῶν ἐνθάδε λεγόμενον, εἰς ὅλην τὴν πρόσταξιν ποιεῖσθαι, ἤγουμένη οὗτος ἃν μάλιστα συγγνώμης αὐτοὺς παρὰ τῶν ἀκουσάντων τυγχάνειν. Here again I would understand μάλιστα as ‘most likely’ rather than adding a specification of ‘degree’ of συγγνώμη (regularly expressed by forms of πολύς rather than adverbially).
Returning to the Thucydidean material, in 3.71.1 the potential optative is a form of δουλώ ‘enslave’; ἥκιστα, I would argue, is used in close conjunction with ἄν to express a low degree of likelihood (in this case, Smith’s translation in fact uses such wording):

(12) δράσαντες δὲ τούτο καὶ ξυγκαλέσαντες Κερκυραίους εἶπον ὅτι ταύτα καὶ βέλτιστα εἶπή καὶ ἥκιστ’ ἂν δουλωθεῖν ὑπ’ ἄθηναιοι, τὸ τε λοιπὸν μηδετέρους δέχεσθαι ἄλλ’ ἦ μιᾷ νη ἦσυχαζοντος, τὸ δὲ πλέον πολέμιον ἤγεισθαι.

After they had taken these measures the conspirators called the Corcyraeans together and told them that it was all for the best, and that now they would be least likely to be enslaved by the Athenians; and in future they should remain neutral and receive neither party if they came with more than one ship, regarding any larger number as hostile (Smith)

… what they had done was all for the best and would prevent the island being enslaved by Athens … (Warner)

An expression of degree like ἥκιστα ‘to the least extent’ would seem incompatible with this verb, as with ὀρθόω.26 ἥκιστα is sometimes equated with a strong negation (‘minime’);27 however, an actual negation here would lead to a reading ‘that it was not possible that they would be enslaved’, which is not wanted here.28

26 Note, however, that ἥκιστα is also combined with a future indicative in an indirect question in 6.82.2: ἐσκεψάµεθα ὅτῳ τρόπῳ ἥκιστα αὐτῶν ὑπακουσόµεθα, “how to be least subservient,” i.e., how to avoid, but perhaps also, how to be least likely to…

27 One instance of ἥκιστα ἂν in Plato I find hard to decide, but I lean toward a ‘minime’ as opposed to a ‘least likely’ interpretation: “σκόπτεις, ὦ Σάκρατες,” “οὐ µα τὸν Φίλιον τὸν ἐµὸν τε καὶ σὸν, ὃν ἐγὼ ἥκιστ’ ἄν ἐπιορκήσασθι”: “You are joking, Socrates.” “No, I swear by our common God of Friendship, whose name I would never (be least likely) to take in vain” (Alc. 1 109d).

28 6.82.3 is quite similar: αὐτοὶ δὲ τῶν ὑπὸ βασιλεῖς πρῶτερον ὄντων ἡγεμόνες καταστάντες οἰκούμεν, νοµίζαντες ἥκιστ’ ἂν ὑπὸ Πελοποννησίους οὕτως εἶναι, δύναµιν ἐχοντες ἦ ἀµυνούµεθα, καὶ ἐς τὸ ἀκριβές εἰπὲν οὔθε ἀδίκως καταστρεφόµενοι τοὺς τε Ἰωνας καὶ νησίωτας, οὕς ἐγγεγεζεῖς φασιν ὄντας ἡµᾶς Συρακόσιοι δεδουλώσαται, “Having ourselves become leaders of those
An example from extended indirect discourse is at 5.36.1:

(13) οὕτω γὰρ ἡκιστ' ἄν ἀναγκασθῇναι Βοιωτοὺς ἐς τὰς Ἀττικὰς σπονδὰς ἐσελθεῖν· ἐλέσθαι γὰρ Λακεδαιμονίους πρὸ τῆς Αθηναίων ἔχθρας καὶ διαλύσεως τῶν σπονδῶν Ἀργείους σφίσι φίλους καὶ ξυμμάχους γενέσθαι.

For in this way the Boeotians would be least likely to be forced to come into the treaty with Athens, since the Lacedaemonians would prefer gaining the friendship and alliance of the Argives, counting that more important than the enmity of the Athenians and the disruption of the treaty (Smith).

Again, with the verb ἀναγκάζω a degree reading seems to make little sense—the Boeotians would not be forced to a lesser degree; rather, the proposed strategy (οὕτως) makes their alliance with Athens less likely.

Presence of another adverb

A further factor that points in the direction of interpreting

who were before subject to the King, we so continue, thinking that we should in this way be least subject to the Peloponnesians, because we have power with which to defend ourselves” (Smith). I propose to translate instead: “that we should in this way be least likely to be subject…” Also 3.24.1: ἐν δεξιᾷ ἔχοντες τὸ τοῦ Ἀνδροκράτους ἱππόν, νομίζοντες ἡκιστ' ἄν ἄριστοι ὑποτοπῆσαι τραπέσθαι τὴν ἐς τοὺς πολέμους, ”[The Plataeans] keeping the sanctuary of the hero Androcrates on the right, believing that they [the Peloponnesians] would be least likely to suspect them of taking that route, which led to the enemy.”

29 In 6.49.2 μάλιστα seems equally incompatible with περιγενέσθαι ‘survive; come out on top’; αἰφνίδιοι δὲ ἦν προσπέσωσιν, ἐφὶ ἐπὶ περιδεεῖς προσδέχονται, μάλιστα ἄν σφάζεις περιγενέσθαι. 4.80.3 is a similar case, with a degree expression incompatible with ἐπιθέσθαι: προεῖπον αὐτῶν ὥσιν ἄξιοῦ σφᾶς τῶν πολέμων γεγενήσθαι σφίσιν ἁγίοις, κρίνεσθαι, ὡς ἐλευθερώσοντες, πείραν ποιούμενοι καὶ ἤγομενοι τούτοις σφίσιν ὑπὸ φρονήματος, ὡσπερ καὶ ἠξίωσαν πρῶτος ἡκιστὸς ἐλευθεροῦσθαι, μάλιστα ἄν καὶ ἐπιθέσθαι, “They made proclamation that all Helots who claimed to have rendered the Lacedaemonians the best service in war should be set apart, ostensibly to be set free. They were, in fact, merely testing them, thinking that those who claimed, each for himself, the first right to be set free would be precisely the men of high spirit who would be the most likely to attack their masters.”
μάλιστα as a disjunct rather than as an adjunct is the presence of other adverbs in the clause (4.19.2):

(14) νομίζομεν τε τάς μεγάλας ἐχθρας μάλιστα’ ἄν διαλύεσθαι βεβαιῶς, οὐκ ἦν ἄντομονόμενος τις καὶ ἐπικρατήσας τὰ πλείον τῷ πολέμῳ κατ’ ἀνάγκην ὀρκους ἐγκαταλάβας μὴ ἀπὸ τοῦ ίσου ἐξαρθῆναι, ὅλα’ ἦν παρὸν τὸ αὐτὸ δράσαι πρὸς τὸ ἐπιεικὲς καὶ ἄρετή αὐτὸν νικήσας παρὰ ὃ προσεδέχετο μετρίως ξυναλλαγῆ.

We believe, too, that a permanent reconciliation of bitter enmities is more likely to be secured, not when one party seeks revenge and, because he has gained a decided mastery in the war, tries to bind his opponent by compulsory oaths and thus makes peace with him on unequal terms… (Smith)

Indeed if great enmities are ever to be really settled, we think it will be, not by the system of revenge and military success… (Crawley)

As Smith saw, it is unlikely that μάλιστα would be used to further modify βεβαίως (the superlative βεβαιότατα occurs at 1.138.3 and 6.91.6);30 similarly, in 6.24.1 ἀσφαλῶς is already present as a modifier of ἐκπλεῦσαι:

(15) ὁ μὲν Νικίας τοσαῦτα εἶπε νομίζον τοὺς Αθηναίους τῷ πλήθει τῶν πραγμάτων ἢ ἀποτρέψειν ἢ, εἰ ἀναγκάζοντο στρατεύεσθαι, μάλιστα’ <ἄν> οὕτως ἀσφαλῶς ἐκπλεῦσαι.

So much Nicias said, thinking that he would deter the Athenians by the multitude of his requirements, or, if he should be forced to make the expedition, he would in this way set out most safely.

I propose to translate instead: “in this way, he would be most likely to set out safely.”31

Conclusion

More than has been practiced in translations so far, I believe

30 The superlative ἀσφαλεῖστα is found in 1.107.4 and 6.18.7.

31 Further examples with both μάλιστα and οὕτως (‘do such and such, for in this way it would be most likely that…’) in 6.38.5 μάλιστα γὰρ δοκῶ ἄν μοι οὕτως ἀποτρέψειν τὴν κακουργίαν and 7.8.2 ἔγραψεν ἐπιστολήν, νομίζον οὕτως ἂν μάλιστα τὴν αὐτὸν γνώςαν μὴδὲν ἐν τῷ ἀγέλῳ ἀφανισθέισαν μαθόντας τοὺς Αθηναίους βουλεύσασθαι περὶ τῆς ἀληθείας.
μάλιστα and the other adverbs discussed here should be interpreted as expressions of likelihood. In this paper I have not exhausted the possible examples from Thucydides and barely touched other authors. In conclusion, I should therefore perhaps state explicitly that I do not consider this use of degree adverbs to specify likelihood a feature of Thucydides’ style or a marker of elevated prose style more generally. In Xenophon’s manual on horsemanship we find an example as part of his advice on selecting a good horse, where the point is not finding the best possible horse (Eq. 1.17):

(16) εἶδος µὲν δὴ πῶλου οὕτω δοκιµµάζοντες µάλιστα ἄν ἡµῖν δοκοῦσι τυγχάνειν εὐποδος καὶ ἰσχυρος καὶ εὐσάρκης καὶ εὐσχήµονος καὶ εὐµεγέθους.  
He who applies these tests to a colt’s shape is sure, in my opinion, to get a beast with good feet, strong, muscular, of the right look and the right size. (transl. Marchant, Loeb, 1925)

Similarly, in Aristophanes’ Lysistrata Calonice asks whether abstinence will increase the likelihood of peace (146–148):

(17) εἰ δ’ ὡς µάλιστα ἀπεχοίµεθα οὐ σὺ δὴ λέγεις, –  
ο µὴ γένοιτο, – µάλλον ἄν διὰ τούτοι γένοιτ’ ἄν εἰρήηη;  
Well, what if we did abstain from, uh, what you say, which heaven forbid: would peace be likelier to come on that account? (transl. Henderson, Loeb, 2000)

Neither is it the case that I am proposing that every instance of µάλιστα ἄν be interpreted the same way. In Thuc. 5.9.5, a superlative is needed with ἀπατήσας to balance καλλίστην and µέγιστα:

(18) καὶ τὰ κλέµµατα ταύτα καλλίστην δόξαν ἔχει ἄ τὸν πολέµιον µάλιστα ἄν τὶς ἀπατήσας τὸς φίλους µέγιστα ἄν ὑφελησειεν.  
And these stratagems, which do the greatest service to our friends by most completely deceiving our enemies, have the most brilliant name in war. (Crawley)

In quite a few cases, the interpretation is not certain. Is one most likely to terrify the enemy, or could one terrify them most (6.34.4, µάλιστα ἄν αὐτοὺς ἐκπλήξαμεν)? I will conclude with a familiar passage to illustrate the problem. I believe Thucydid-
des to say in 2.48.3 that someone with prior knowledge would be the most likely to be able to recognize a return of the plague, but translators and commentators offer a variety of translations:

(19) ἐγὼ δὲ οἷόν τε ἐγίγνετο λέξω, καὶ ἀφ’ ὧν ἂν ἂν τις σκοπῶν, εἰ ποτε καὶ σύμπαν ἐπιπέσει, μᾶλλον ἂν ἔχοι τι προειδός μὴ ἀγνοεῖν, ταῦτα δηλώσω…

I shall reveal the things [symptoms] which, if someone should investigate [the disease] on their basis and gain some prior knowledge [of it], he would be most able to recognise it, if it should ever occur again…

… best able (Smith)
… explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized (Crawley)
… knowledge of which would enable it to be recognized (Warner)

This paper will have fulfilled its purpose if it makes readers more likely to consider this further option when encountering degree adverbs.34

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32 Classen-Steup (II 81) do not translate, but it appears that they connect μᾶλλον with προειδός: “es ist das [mē ἀγνοεῖν] aber möglich durch das προειδός τι, wenn man sie so wie möglich kennen gelernt hat.”


34 I first became aware of this phenomenon while reading Thucydides Book 5 with my students Branden Kosch and Jonah Radding. I thank them, as well as Elizabeth Asmis, Harm Pinkster, David Sansone, Ruth Scodel, and Peter White for their encouragement and helpful comments. A version of this paper was presented at the APA in Chicago in January 2014.

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