When used in the ordinary way, i.e. when expressing ‘A to the highest degree’, superlatives are probably semantically definite: from the perspective of the Russellian uniqueness theory of definiteness (or Hawkins’ extension of it) it seems undeniable that a noun qualified by means of a (relative) superlative refers uniquely to the entity described by it. But also in Christophersen’s familiarity theory of definiteness, such a phrase will certainly be considered to be definite, as the referent is in principle recoverable, and hence ‘familiar’.

In the Germanic and Romance languages superlatives in attributive position are in most cases formally definite as well, as they seem to require the presence of a definite determiner, usually the definite article, or a possessive pronoun or phrase. In the Romance languages the presence of a definite determiner turns a comparative into a (relative) superlative, e.g.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparative</th>
<th>Superlative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fr</td>
<td>un modèle plus efficace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp</td>
<td>un modelo mas eficaz</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Germanic languages comparatives and superlatives differ in form, e.g. Eng. taller – tallest; more efficient – most efficient. In these languages the definite article preceding the superlative has an different function: its presence means most often that the superlative is used in its ordinary relative sense, its absence that it is used in an ‘absolute’ sense: ‘A to a very high degree’, e.g.:

- She is the most intelligent person I know
- She is a most intelligent young lady
- What records have you been the most impressed with lately?
- I have been most impressed

In the North-Germanic languages with ‘double-definiteness’ (Swedish, Norwegian and Faroese) the presence of a number of different markers of definiteness makes it possible to make even finer distinctions. In Swedish there are the following five possible construction types with superlatives in attributive position:

A. uninflected superlative, no article, no suffix on the noun

- Vilken sorts fruktträd har vackrast blommor?
  what kind of fruit tree has beautiful-SUP flowers

B. definite article + definite form of the superlative + suffix on the noun

- De giftigaste örterna har ofta de vackraste blommorna.
  the toxic-SUP-DEF herbs-DEF have often the beautiful-SUP-DEF flowers-DEF

C. no definite article; definite form of the superlative + suffix on the noun

- yngsta barnet
  young-SUP-DEF child-DEF

D. definite article + definite form of the superlative; no suffix on the noun

- Det hårskade den största oordning i huset
  there reigned the big-SUP-DEF disorder in house-DEF
E. no definite article; definite form of the superlative; no suffix on the noun

\[ \text{med största nöje} \]

with great-SUP-DEF pleasure

D and E are absolute superlatives, which seems to show that the definite article in type D does not make the noun phrase definite, but seems to be tied to just the superlative, and hence, is not a definite determiner placed in the determiner position of the DP/NP: [den största] \_A oordning. The difference in meaning between the constructions with (B, D) and without (C, E) the adjective article is the same as the one found between ordinary (positive) adjectives with and without the article, e.g. vita huset ‘the White House (in Washington)’ – det vita huset ‘the white house’, i.e. some white house that has been the subject of attention/discussion in previous conversation. Yngsta barnet is the youngest child in a family, the ‘Benjamin’, det yngsta barnet is the youngest child in a group of other children, in school etc.

The conclusion to be drawn from the behaviour of superlatives in Swedish seems to be that the article in double (or triple) definite constructions is not a definite determiner after all, but only a satellite of the weak adjective. Definiteness of the noun phrase is only signalled by the suffix on the noun, unless there is a ‘real’ determiner present in D-position, e.g. a possessive.

Construction type A shows either that there is no one-to-one relationship between definite form and definite meaning, or that relative superlatives are not necessarily definite after all.