

Relative *Most* Compared

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Superlatives: two interpretations

(1) Jan heeft de hoogste berg beklommen.
John has the highest mountain climbed
'John climbed the highest mountain.'

- a. John climbed Mount Everest. (absolute)
- b. John climbed a higher mountain than anyone else. (relative)

How do the two interpretations arise? It is often claimed in the literature that the DP containing the superlative has a semantically vacuous determiner, but at a deeper level it is:

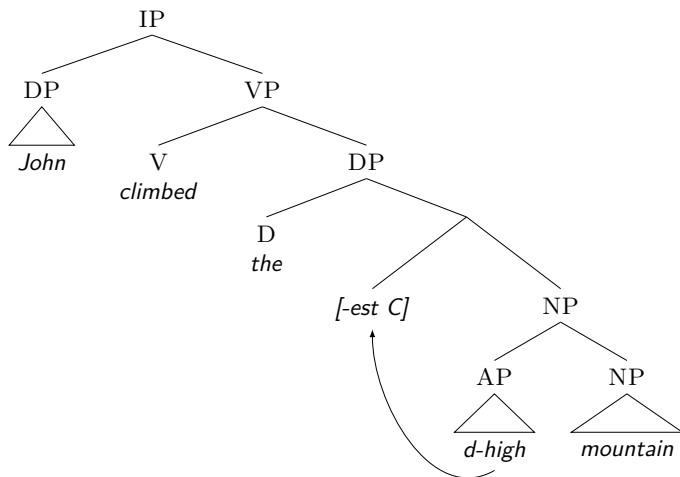
- definite in absolute interpretations
- indefinite in relative interpretations.

(e.g. Szabolcsi (1986); Heim (1999); Hackl (2009))

More specifically...

The place of the superlative morpheme determines the interpretation:

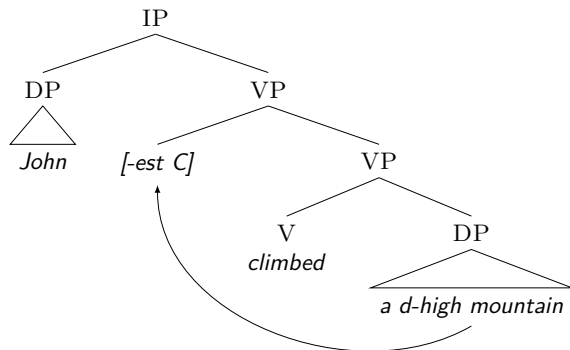
(2) (Hackl, 2009, p. 80)



More specifically...

The place of the superlative morpheme determines the interpretation:

(3) Hackl (2009, p. 80)



The first puzzle

Sentences with existential *there* (ET) may contain indefinite DPs in the postverbal position, but no definite DPs (Milsark, 1974):

(4) Er is een berg in Canada.
there is a mountain in Canada
'There is a mountain in Canada.'

(5) *Er is de berg in Canada.
there is the mountain in Canada

Prediction: the relative interpretation is available when the DP is indefinite.
However:

(6) *Er is de hoogste berg in Canada.
there is the highest mountain in Canada

The second puzzle

In Dutch, *de meeste* '(the) most' behaves like other regular superlatives:

- (7) Jan heeft de meeste bergen beklommen.
John has the most mountains climbed
'John climbed (the) most mountains.'
- a. John climbed more mountains than he didn't climb. (proportional)
 - b. John climbed more mountains than anyone else did. (relative)

In Flemish, *meeste* also combines with the article *het*, that normally only appears in front of neuter mass and singular nouns:

- (8) Jan heeft het meeste bergen beklommen.
John has the most mountains climbed
'John climbed the most mountains.' (relative)

Note that *het bergen* is ungrammatical:

- (9) *Jan heeft het bergen beklommen
John has the mountains climbed

The third puzzle

De meeste is definite, *het meeste* is indefinite:

(10) *Er zijn de meeste bergen in Canada.
there are the most mountains in Canada

(11) Er zijn het meeste bergen in Canada.
there are the most mountains in Canada
'There are the most mountains in Canada.'

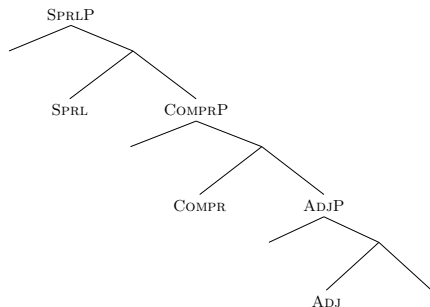
(relative)

- Is it possible to develop an analysis that takes these definiteness facts at face value?

The claim in my thesis

Syntactically, the superlative embeds the comparative and an adjective, following Bobaljik (2012).

(12)



The claim in my thesis

Semantically, the superlative consists of

- an adjective: the measure function (e.g. *high*)
- a comparative: takes the measure function and uses it to compare a certain property of two entities
- the superlative: applies the comparative recursively to a set using universal quantification
- the definite determiner: adds a uniqueness requirement
 - ▶ a unique mountain is the highest
 - ▶ a unique climber climbed the highest mountain.

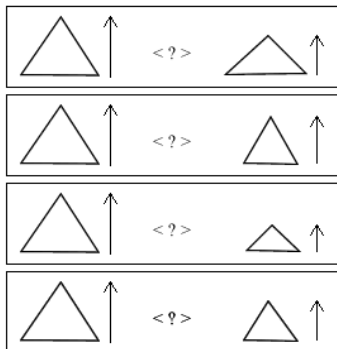
The claim in my thesis



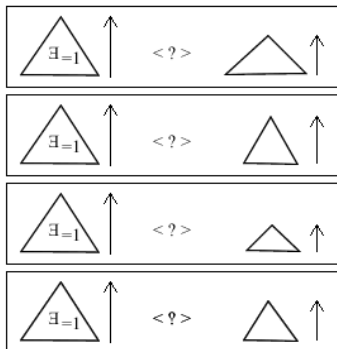
The claim in my thesis



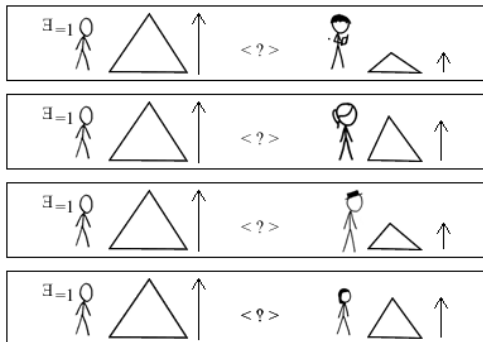
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The claim in my thesis



The claim in my thesis



The claim in my thesis

- (+) Accounts for the definiteness data: the definite determiner is present both semantically and syntactically.
- (−) No semantic analysis for *het meeste* (in ET contexts despite definite determiner).
- (±) Prediction: all superlatives require a definite determiner.

Cross-linguistic data

- English, German
- Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic
- Does the definite determiner appear in superlative structures and constructions with *most*?
- Are there any constructions similar to Flemish rogue *het meeste*?
- How do the superlatives behave in sentences with ET?

English: superlatives

- (13) John climbed the highest mountain.
- a. John climbed Mount Everest. (absolute)
 - b. John climbed a higher mountain than anyone else did. (relative)
- (14) John climbed most mountains.
- a. John climbed more mountains than he didn't climb. (proportional)
 - b. - (relative)
- (15) John climbed the most mountains.
- a. - (proportional)
 - b. John climbed more mountains than anyone else did. (relative)

But Szabolcsi (2013) claims that bare *most* may also have a relative interpretation.

English: ET

- (16) * There is the highest mountain in Canada.
- (17) * There are most mountains in Canada.
- (18) */?* There are the most mountains in Canada.

English: overview

- Adjectival superlatives have absolute and relative interpretations
- *Most* shows somewhat strange behaviour:
 - ▶ no definite determiner: proportional interpretation
 - ▶ definite determiner: relative interpretation
 - ▶ but neither can appear in ET.

German: superlatives

- (19) Hans hat den höchsten Berg bestiegen.
Hans has the highest mountain climbed
'Hans climbed the highest mountain.' (absolute/relative)
- (20) Hans hat die meisten Berge bestiegen.
Hans has the most mountains climbed
'Hans climbed (the) most mountains.' (proportional/relative)
- (21) Hans hat am meisten Berge bestiegen.
Hans has at-the most mountains climbed
'Hans climbed the most mountains.' (relative)

German: ET

- (22) * Es gibt den höchsten Berg in Kanada.
there is the highest mountain in Canada
- (23) Es gibt die höchsten Berge in Kanada.
there are the highest mountains in Canada
'Canada has the highest mountains.' (relative)
- (24) Es gibt die meisten Berge in Kanada.
there are the most mountains in Canada
'Canada has the most mountains.' (relative)
- (25) * Es gibt am meisten Berge in Kanada.
there are at-the most mountains in Canada

German: overview

- German behaves very much like Flemish:
 - ▶ the adjectival superlative has an absolute and a relative interpretation
 - ▶ *most* appears with a determiner and has both the proportional and the relative interpretation
 - ▶ there is a rogue form *am meisten* that only has the relative interpretation.
- However:
 - ▶ superlatives may appear in sentences with ET, with a relative interpretation if the noun is plural
 - ▶ this supports the link between definiteness and the different interpretations.

Overview

	Adj. superlative (<i>highest</i>)			<i>Most</i>		
	SING.DEF	PL.DEF	INDEF	PL.DEF	PL.INDEF	non-agr
Flemish	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop/Rel	x	Rel
English	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Rel	Prop	x
German	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop/Rel	x	Rel

Swedish: superlatives

Already described in Coppock and Josefson (2015).

- (26) John besteg det högsta berget.
John climbed the highest mountain.SING.DEF
'John climbed the highest mountain' (absolute/relative)
- (27) John har snabbast dator/datorer.
John has fastest computer.SING.INDEF/computer.pl.indef
'John has the fastest computer/computers.' (relative)
- (28) John har bestigit de flesta bergen
John has climbed the most mountain.PL.DEF
'John climbed most mountains.' (proportional)
- (29) John har bestigit flest berg.
John has climbed most mountain.PL.INDEF
'John climbed the most mountains.' (relative)

Swedish: ET

- (30) *Det finns de högsta bergen i Kanada.
there are the highest mountains.SING.DEF in Canada
- (31) Det finns snabbast dator/datorer i
there is fastest computer.SING.INDEF/computer.PL.INDEF in
Kanada.
Canada
'There is/are the fastest computer(s) in Canada.'
- (32) *Det finns de flesta bergen i Kanada.
there are the most mountains.PL.DEF in Canada
- (33) Det finns flest berg i Kanada.
there are most mountain.PL.INDEF in Canada
'There are the most mountains in Canada.'

Swedish: overview

- Adjectival superlatives
 - ▶ appear in definite DPs with the absolute and the relative interpretation.
 - ▶ appear in indefinite DPs, with a relative interpretation.
- *Most*
 - ▶ appears in definite DPs, with a proportional interpretation.
 - ▶ appears in indefinite DPs, with a relative interpretation.
- Definite DPs cannot appear in ET.
- Indefinite DPs appear in ET, with a relative interpretation.
- Strong evidence for the link between indefinite DPs containing superlatives and relative interpretations.

Norwegian: superlatives

- (34) John besteg det høyeste fjellet.
John climbed the highest mountain.SING.DEF
'John climbed the highest mountain.' (absolute/relative)
- (35) John besteg høyest fjell.
John climbed highest mountain.PL.INDEF.
'John climbed more mountains than anyone else.' (relative)
- (36) John besteg de fleste fjella.
John climbed the most mountain.PL.DEF
'John climbed most mountains.' (proportional)
- (37) John besteg flest fjell.
John climbed most mountains.PL.INDEF
'John climbed the most mountains.' (relative)

Norwegian: ET

- (38) *Det er de høyeste fjella i Kanada.
there is the highest mountain.PL.DEF in Canada
- (39) Det er høyest fjell i Kanada.
there are highest mountain.PL.INDEF in Canada
'Canada has the highest mountains.' (relative)
- (40) *Det er de flesta fjella i Kanada.
there are the most mountain.PL.DEF in Canada
- (41) Det er flest fjell i Kanada.
there are most mountain.PL.INDEF in Canada
'Canada has the most mountains.' (relative)

Norwegian: overview

- Norwegian follows the Swedish pattern, but the adjectival superlative can only be indefinite in the plural.

Icelandic: superlatives

- (42) Jón kleif hæsta fjallið.
John climbed highest mountain.SING.DEF
'John climbed the highest mountain.' (absolute/relative)
- (43) ? Jón kleif hæst fjöll.
John climbed highest mountain.PL.INDEF
'John climbed the most mountains.' (relative)
- (44) Jón kleif flest fjölin.
John climbed most mountain.PL.DEF
'John climbed most mountains.' (proportional)
- (45) Jón kleif flest fjöll.
John climbed most mountain.PL.INDEF
'John climbed the most mountains.' (relative)

Icelandic: ET

(46) * Það er hæst fjallið i Kanada.
there is highest mountain.SING.DEF in Canada

(47) * Það eru flest fjöllin i Kanada.
there are most mountain.PL.DEF in Canada

(48) Það eru flest fjöll i Kanada
there are most mountain.PL.INDEF in Canada
'Canada has the most mountains'

(relative)

Icelandic: overview

- Icelandic follows the Swedish and Norwegian pattern, but the adjectival superlative can not be indefinite.

Overview

	Degree superlative (<i>highest</i>)			<i>Most</i>		
	SING.DEF	PL.DEF	INDEF	PL.DEF	PL.INDEF	non-agr
Flemish	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop/Rel	x	Rel
English	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Rel	Prop	(Rel???)
German	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop/Rel	x	Rel
Swedish	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	Rel	Prop	Rel	x
Norwegian	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	Rel (pl.)	Prop	Rel	x
Icelandic	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop	Rel	x

- Adjectival superlatives

- ▶ All indefinite DPs have a relative interpretation.
- ▶ All definite DPs are ambiguous between the absolute and the relative interpretation.
- ▶ German is the only language that shows evidence for “indefiniteness at a deeper level”
- ▶ Swedish is the only language where superlatives appear in indefinite DPs without any restrictions (e.g. singular/plural).

Overview

	Degree superlative (<i>highest</i>)			<i>Most</i>		
	SING.DEF	PL.DEF	INDEF	PL.DEF	PL.INDEF	non-agr
Flemish	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop/Rel	x	Rel
English	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Rel	Prop	(Rel???)
German	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop/Rel	x	Rel
Swedish	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	Rel	Prop	Rel	x
Norwegian	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	Rel (pl.)	Prop	Rel	x
Icelandic	Abs/Rel	Abs/Rel	x	Prop	Rel	x

- *Most*

- ▶ follows the pattern of adjectival superlatives in Flemish and German, but they also have a non-agreeing 'adverbial' form with *most*.
- ▶ shows strange behaviour in English. Bare *most* appears to be definite.
- ▶ Maybe *the most* is also an instance of a non-agreeing 'adverbial' form?
- ▶ In Scandinavian languages, *most* yields proportional interpretations in definite DPs and relative ones in indefinite DPs.

A way out for 'adverbial' *most*?

Link between adverbs and *the most*, *het meeste*, *am meisten*:

(49) I like Treme the most.

(50) Ik hou het meest van Treme.

I love the most of Treme

'I love Treme the most'

(Flemish)

(51) Hans hat am schnellsten die Berge bestiegen.

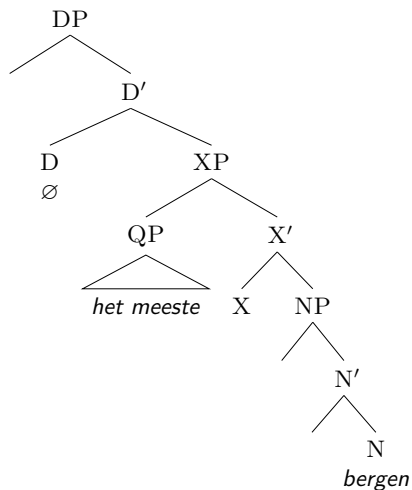
Hans has at-the fastest the mountains climbed

'Hans climbed the mountains the fastest.'

(German)

A way out for 'adverbial' *most*?

(52)



A way out for 'adverbial' *most*?

- Is it possible
 - ▶ that the non-agreeing forms are in fact embedded in a bare DP?
 - ▶ the *het* and *the* in Flemish and English are not determiners?
 - ▶ that these constructions are thus equivalent to the Scandinavian superlatives in indefinite DPs?

Some conclusions

- There seem to be two strategies for superlatives: one with a definite determiner, one without a definite determiner.
- There is a link between indefinite DPs and relative interpretations.
- The prediction that superlatives require definite determiners is not borne out, but how does the uniqueness requirement arise in the Scandinavian languages?
- More research necessary, also taking into account sentences with inalienable *have*:

(53) John has a/*the sister.

(54) Joh has the smartest sister. (relative)

Thank you!

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