

# (The) most in Dutch: Definiteness and Specificity

## Introduction

Dutch has two constructions that express (the) most:

- (1) Jan heeft [de meeste bergen] beklimmen.  
John has the<sub>pl.masc.</sub> most mountains<sub>pl.masc.</sub> climbed  
'John climbed (the) most mountains.'

The sentence with *de meeste* '(the) most' has two possible readings:

- Proportional: "more than half"
- Comparative: "more mountains than the other climbers did"

- (2) Jan heeft [het meeste bergen] beklimmen.  
John has the<sub>sing.neut.</sub> most mountains<sub>pl.masc.</sub> climbed  
'John climbed the most mountains.'

The expression with *het meeste* 'the most' shows strange behaviour:

- only the comparative reading is available
- the neuter determiner *het* 'the' does not agree with the head noun *bergen* 'mountains'.

One could argue that *het meeste* is an adverb, but it does not behave like one when it is topicalised:

- (3) \* [Het vaakste bergen] heeft JAN beklimmen.  
the most-often mountains has John climbed
- (4) [Het meeste bergen] heeft JAN beklimmen.  
the most mountains has John climbed  
'John climbed the most mountains.'

## Two Research Questions

- Why does *het meeste* occur with a plural masculine noun?
- Why does it only have a comparative reading?

## Test 1: Existential there

Only indefinite DPs can appear in sentences with existential *there* [Milsark(1974)], [Szabolcsi(1986)]:

- (5) Er is een man in de straat.  
there is a<sub>indef.</sub> man in the street  
'There is a man in the street.'
- (6) \*Er is de man in de straat.  
there is the<sub>def.</sub> man in the street

Let's try this with *het meeste* and *de meeste*:

- (7) Er zijn het meeste bergen in Zwitserland.  
there are the most mountains in Switzerland  
'There are the most mountains in Switzerland.'
- (8) \*Er zijn de meeste bergen in Zwitserland.  
there are the most mountains in Switzerland

→ *Het meeste* appears to be indefinite, *de meeste* definite.

## Test 2: Scrambling

Non-specific indefinite DPs can't be scrambled.

- Specific: the speaker has a particular object in mind.
- Non-specific: the speaker does not have a particular object in mind.

((Hawkins(1978)))

Non-specific indefinites can't appear in a position left of the adverb:

- (9) a. ...dat Jan gisteren **de/een auto** gekregen heeft.  
...that John yesterday the/a car gotten has  
'...that John got the/a car yesterday.'
- b. ...dat Jan **de/?een auto** gisteren gekregen heeft.  
...that John the/a car yesterday gotten has  
'...that John got the/a car yesterday.'

Let's try this with *de meeste* and *het meeste*:

- (10) a. ...dat Jan gisteren **de meeste bergen** beklimmen heeft.  
...that John yesterday the most mountains climbed has  
'...that John climbed (the) most mountains yesterday.'
- b. ...dat Jan **de meeste bergen** gisteren beklimmen heeft.  
...that John the most mountains yesterday climbed has  
'...that John climbed most mountains yesterday.'
- c. ...dat Jan gisteren **het meeste bergen** beklimmen heeft.  
...that John yesterday the most mountains climbed has  
'...that John climbed the most mountains yesterday.'
- d. \* ...dat Jan **het meeste bergen** gisteren beklimmen heeft.  
...that John the most mountains yesterday climbed has

→ Comparative readings are non-specific indefinite.

→ Since *het meeste* is always indefinite, it only has a comparative reading.

## Analysis: AGR and \*AGR

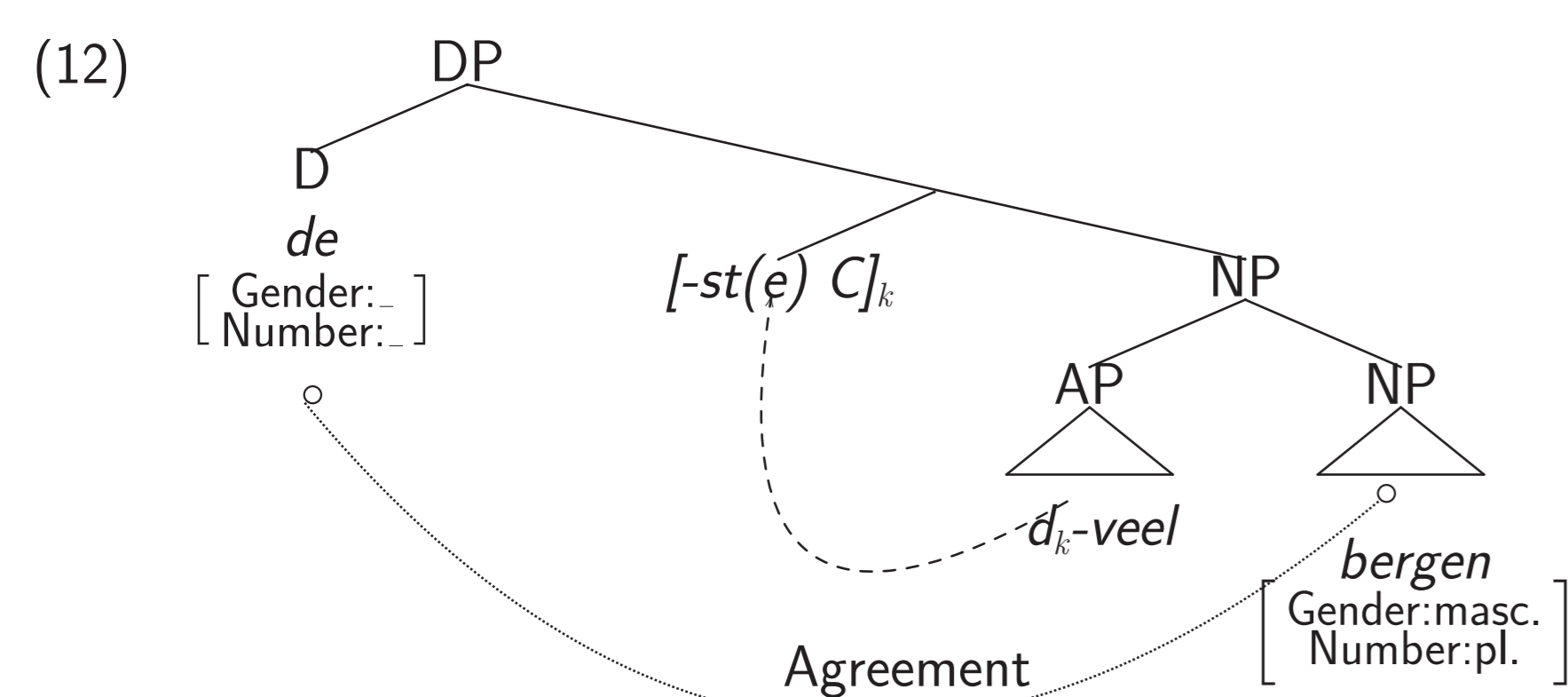
*De meeste* and *het meeste* behave differently in combination with plural nouns:

- (11) a. Jan heeft de (meeste) bergen beklimmen.  
John has the<sub>pl.masc.</sub> most mountains<sub>pl.masc.</sub> climbed  
'John climbed (the) most mountains.'
- b. Jan heeft het \*(meeste) bergen beklimmen.  
John has the<sub>sing.neut.</sub> most mountains<sub>pl.masc.</sub> climbed  
'John climbed the most mountains.'

I claim that there are two different structures underlying *de meeste* and *het meeste*.

## AGR

In the AGR structure, the definite determiner agrees with the head noun. The structure in 12 is based on [Hackl(2009)]:

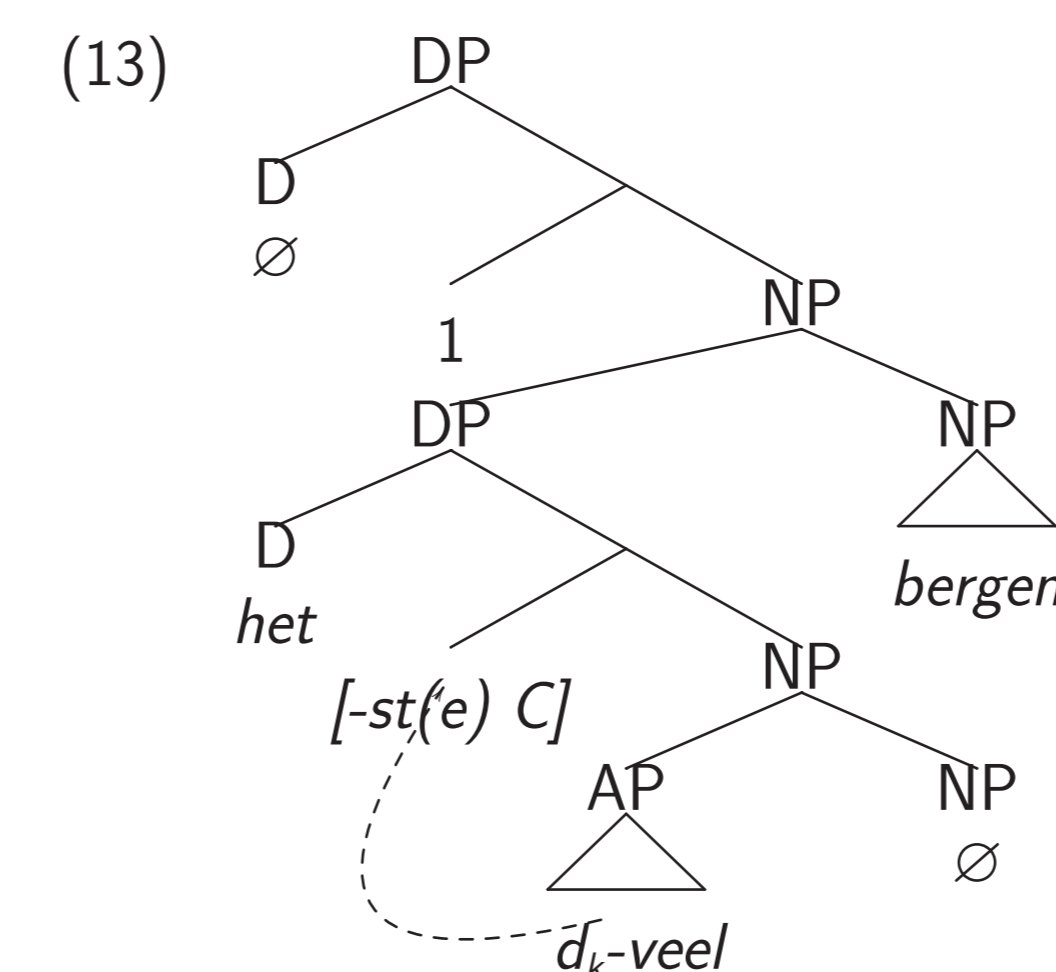


The structure in (12) explains the behaviour of *de meeste*:

- Following [Hackl(2009)], I assume that proportional readings require [-st(e) C] to stay inside the DP at LF.
- The head determiner of the DP is definite, which explains why *de meeste* does not appear in sentences with existential *there*.
- In the comparative reading, [-st(e) C] moves to [SPEC, VP] when the DP is indefinite [Heim(1999), Hackl(2009)].
- In Dutch, comparative readings do indeed appear in positions associated with non-specific indefinite DPs.

## \*AGR

In \*AGR structures, *het* is not the head of the DP:

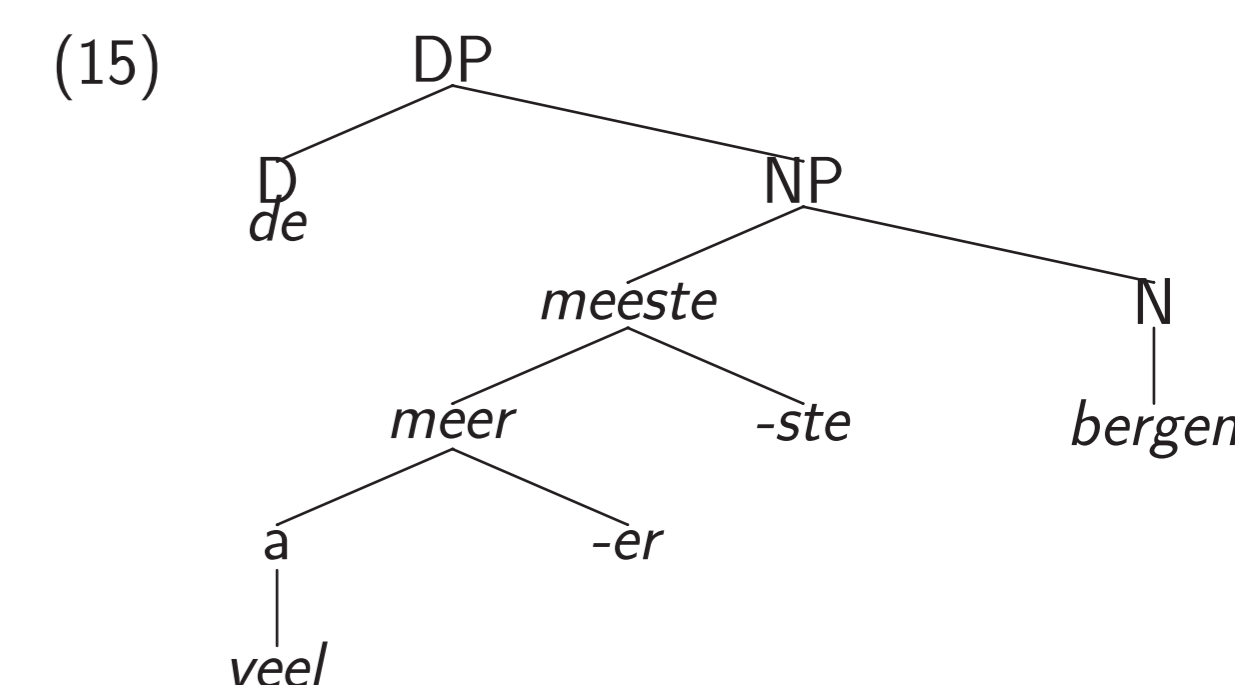
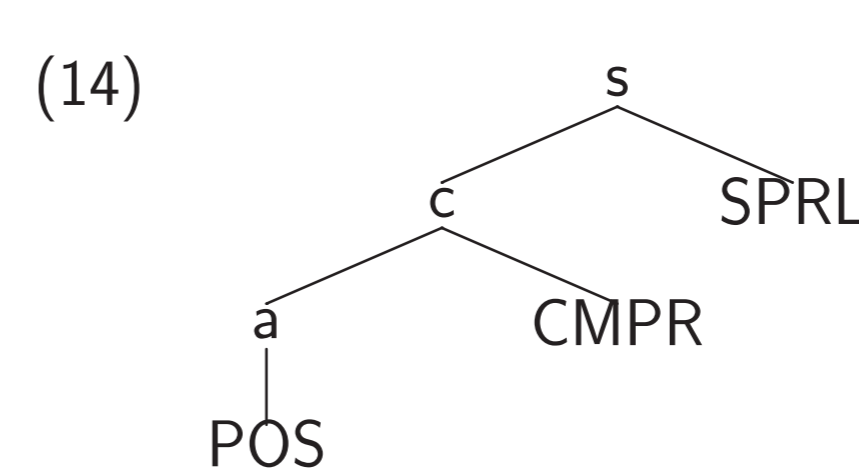


This structure explains the behaviour of *het meeste*:

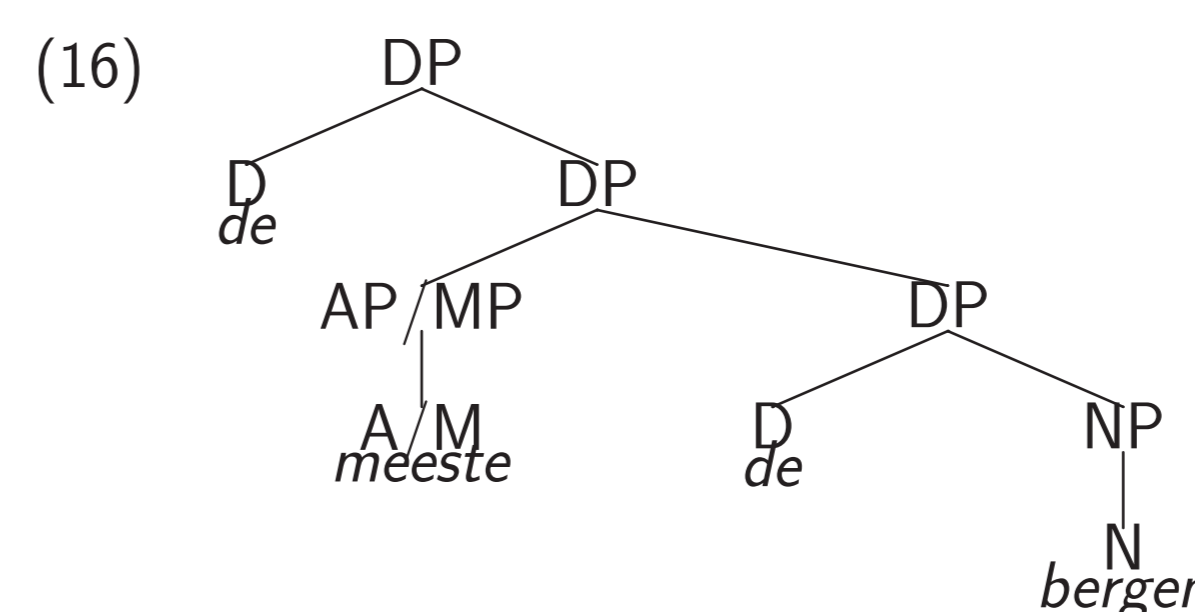
- The head of the DP containing *bergen* has a null head determiner, which makes the whole constituent a bare plural (and hence indefinite).
- The superlative morpheme [-st(e) C] moves up inside the lower DP, but it can only have scope over the null head noun and not over *bergen*.
- Another option is movement to 1, but then [-st(e) C] is no longer in the scope of the definite determiner.
- The proportional reading is thus blocked and the only option left for [-st(e) C] is to move out to [SPEC, VP], which produces the comparative meaning.

## Questions and Work in Progress

- What is the status of the empty NP in \*AGR structures?
- How can one account for the specificity effects?
- Why is the movement of the superlative morpheme not visible in syntax?
- Could the internal structure of *meeste* be more complex? [Bobaljik(2012)] claims that the superlative always contains the positive and the comparative:



- Could the internal structure of the DP be more complex? [Schoorlemmer(2009)] claims that a definite DP contains two D positions that are computed at LF:



- This requires a new semantics for the superlative and a new analysis for the different possible readings of *de/het meeste*.

## Bibliography

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