

Quantity superlatives

Adjectival superlatives give rise to ambiguities (Szabolcsi 1986, a.o.). “Mary read the longest articles” has both an “absolute” and a “relative” interpretation. On the absolute reading, the comparison class for the superlative is determined just on the basis of the DP “the longest articles”, i.e., articles in a given context, without consideration of who has read them. On the relative reading, the comparison class is determined relative to contextually given alternatives to Mary who have read articles. On some accounts the two readings are the result of a structural ambiguity: DP scope for the superlative quantifier “-est” yields the absolute reading, while clausal scope for “-est” results in the relative reading (Szabolcsi 1986, Heim 1999, a.o.).

The relation between proportional “most”, as in “Mary read most articles”, and superlative “most”, as in “Mary read the most articles” has been analyzed as a case of the absolute-relative ambiguity (Hackl 2009, a.o.). Specifically, proportional “most” is argued to also be a syntactically complex superlative expression, a case of a DP-internal “-est-many”, while the superlative “most” is an “-est-many” whose “-est” takes sentential scope.

There are languages, however, whose quantity superlative “most” does not also have a proportional reading (Živanović 2008), seemingly threatening the compositional analysis of proportional “most” and the parallels between quantity and adjectival superlatives. One attempt to explain this cross-linguistic challenge is offered by Bošković and Gajweski 2009, who propose that in languages without the definite article the quantity superlative obligatorily moves into the clause, preventing the absolute/proportional reading.

I will suggest that the reason for the missing proportional reading cannot be the DP-external movement of “-est”. Rather, I propose that the source of the cross-linguistic variation is the syntax of quantity “many” that underlies quantity “most”. In some languages it is a quantity adjective modifying a null “number” head (as in Kayne 2005), i.e., “-est-many articles” is in fact “-est great number of articles”. The syntax constrains the comparison class for the quantity superlative, precluding an absolute/proportional reading.