

Completely Bare Swedish Superlatives

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In English, superlatives with so-called *relative* readings as in (1a) and (2a) are marked as definite, yet they behave as indefinites (Szabolcsi, 1986).

- (1) a. Gloria climbed the highest mountain. [relative, absolute]
Relative: ‘Gloria climbed a higher mountain than anybody else.’
Absolute: ‘Gloria climbed Mount Everest.’
b. *Gloria climbed highest mountain.
- (2) a. Gloria has visited the most continents. [relative, *proportional]
Relative: ‘Gloria has visited more continents than anyone else’
b. Gloria has visited most continents. [%relative, proportional]
Proportional: ‘Gloria has visited more than half of the continents’

This paper shows that the interpretation of Swedish superlatives interacts with definiteness-marking according to a very different pattern, and develops a unified picture of the two languages involving a mix of the strategies that have previously been proposed to account for relative readings in English and German.

In Swedish, superlatives may lack definiteness-marking entirely as in (3b), and in that case receive only a relative interpretation.

- (3) a. Gloria ritade (den) rolig-ast-e bild-en. [relative, absolute]
Gloria drew the funny-SUP-DEF picture-DEF
‘Gloria drew the funniest picture.’
b. Gloria ritade rolig-ast bild. [relative,*absolute]
Gloria drew funny-SUP picture
‘Gloria drew a funnier picture than anyone else.’

Article-drop in cases like (3a) has been discussed (e.g. Borthen 2007), but cases like (3b) are more extreme, as there is no definiteness-marking on the head noun, and any modifying adjectives would also lack definiteness-marking. The completely bare superlative in (3b) has only a relative reading (cf. Telemann et al. 1999, II, §44, §46), whereas both relative and absolute readings are possible in (3a). This contrast is correlated with focus; (3b) is an appropriate answer to ‘Who drew the funniest picture?’, but not ‘Which picture did Gloria draw?’, while (3a) could answer either.

Amount superlatives exhibit a similar pattern. Only a relative reading is possible in (4b), with a completely bare superlative. (4a) has only a proportional interpretation.

- (4) a. Gloria ritade de flest-a bilder(-na). [*relative, proportional]
Gloria drew the.PL MANY.SUP-PL picture-PL(-DEF)
‘Gloria drew more than half of the pictures.’
b. Gloria ritade flest bild-er. [relative, *proportional]
Gloria drew MANY.SUP picture-PL
‘Gloria drew more pictures than anyone else.’

So definiteness has opposite effects in Swedish and English amount superlatives, save for the relative reading for bare *most* in English pointed out by Szabolcsi (2012).

We account for these superficial contrasts between English and Swedish partly in terms of locality: Swedish allows for a non-local interpretation of the superlative along the lines proposed by Heim (1999) and Hackl (2009), where the superlative takes scope outside the object DP according to the following structure:

- (5) Gloria [[-est C_i] λd [drew $[_{DP}$ [d -MANY] pictures]]]
 ‘Gloria drew more pictures than anyone else in C_i ’
- (6) Gloria [[-est C_i] λd [drew $[_{DP}$ [d -funny] picture]]]
 ‘Gloria drew a funnier picture than anyone else in C_i ’

The superlative having raised out, the uniqueness presupposition of the definite article is not satisfied by the descriptive content of the DP. This has been interpreted to mean that *the* must lose its meaning and be interpreted as *a* in cases like (1a); alternatively, the construction is incompatible with definiteness-marking, as Szabolcsi (2012) suggests. If we follow the latter line and disallow vacuous definiteness-marking, then the movement analysis makes the right predictions for Swedish: lack of definiteness-marking correlates with a relative interpretation.

Since degree superlatives are always definite in English, it follows that they are always interpreted locally. However, they can behave as indefinites because they can undergo existential closure, as Coppock and Beaver (2012) propose for ‘anti-uniqueness’ readings of definites in examples like *Anna didn’t give the only brilliant talk*. We adopt Coppock and Beaver’s (2012) assumption that the definite article encodes uniqueness but not existence, and that definite descriptions normally undergo an ι -shift, yielding a ‘determinate’ reading, but can undergo existential closure in case existence is not presupposed (e.g. in case of a tie for nicest goal), yielding an ‘indeterminate’ reading. The relative reading of (1a), schematized in (7), is definite but indeterminate, and the absolute reading, schematized in (8), is both definite and determinate.

- (7) Gloria λd [scored \exists - $[_{DP}$ the [-est C_i] [d -nice] goal]] [+def, -det]
 ‘There was a goal which was nicer than all other goals in C_i which Gloria scored’
- (8) Gloria λd [scored ι - $[_{DP}$ the [-est C_i] [d -nice] goal]] [+def, +det]
 ‘Gloria scored the goal that was nicer than all other goals in C_i ’

Definite-marked degree superlatives in Swedish have the same interpretive options as those in English: indeterminate (hence relative) or determinate (hence absolute).

Definiteness-marking in amount superlatives does not work quite in the same way, as shown by the optionality of definiteness-marking on the head noun in (4a). This suggests that the plural definite determiner *de* is not the head of the DP as a whole, and rather that *de flesta* forms a constituent, as Krasikova (2012) proposes for English *the most*. This analysis is supported by the fact that it occurs quite often without any head noun at all. We suggest that Swedish definite amount superlatives have a proportional reading because they require the comparison class to be constituted by a non-overlapping collection of objects, as Hackl (2009) proposes for proportional readings of *most*.

To summarize: Swedish exhibits a previously undiscussed pattern of definiteness-marking in superlatives, in which lack of definiteness-marking correlates with relative readings. This suggests that the Heim/Hackl movement strategy works for bare superlatives, but that definiteness-marking is meaningful, signalling uniqueness but not necessarily a presupposition of existence, hence variable determinacy.

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