

What of Superlatives: *of*-Complements as Evidence for the Contextual Dependency Analysis

This paper challenges the assumption that the Contextual Dependency Analysis is insufficient to explain the ambiguity found in superlatives. Using a novel observation that *of*-complements can explicitly denote the comparison class, I show that contextual domain restrictions originating from *the* can restrict the available readings and can account for the two readings of the superlative.

There is a well-known ambiguity observed in the superlative construction between an absolute reading and a relative reading (Szabolcsi, 1986). The analysis of this ambiguity is covered by Szabolcsi (1986); Heim (1999); Stateva (1999); Farkas and Kiss (2000); Sharvit and Stateva (2002); Gutiérrez-Rexach (2006, 2010)

- (1) Who wrote the largest prime number on the blackboard? (Heim, 1999)
- a. No one. There is no largest prime number. **Absolute**
 - b. John did. He was the only one above 100. **Relative**

There are two extant analyses for this ambiguity: Movement Analysis and Contextual-Dependency Analysis. Contemporary theory leans heavily towards the Movement Analysis on the basis that the Contextual-Dependency Analysis cannot ostensibly account for *de re/de dicto* and the upstairs *de dicto* readings of the superlative in intensional contexts (Heim, 1999; Stateva, 1999).

- (2) a. John climbed the highest of the mountains. **Absolute/Relative**
 b. John climbed the highest of mountains. **Absolute**

In (2a), what I call the **Partitive *of*-Complement**, the superlative is still ambiguous between a relative and absolute reading, but (2b), the **Kind *of*-Complement**, is restricted to the absolute reading. It is also possible to focus the *of*-complement in (2a), but not in (2b).

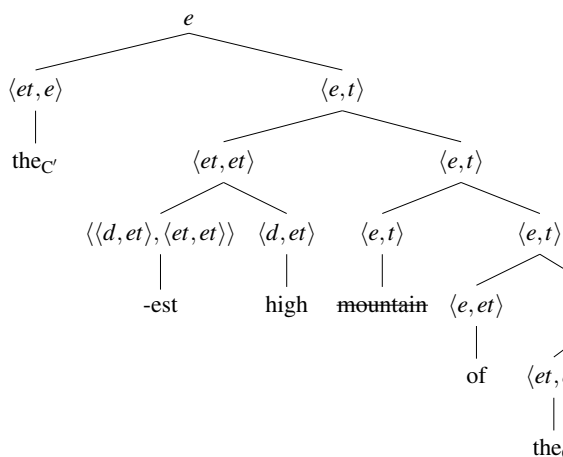
- (3) a. Of the mountains, John climbed the highest (mountain).
 b. * Of mountains, John climbed the highest (mountain).

One-substitution shows that there is a structurally obligatory object in the NP for (2a), while (2b) obligatorily lacks an object.

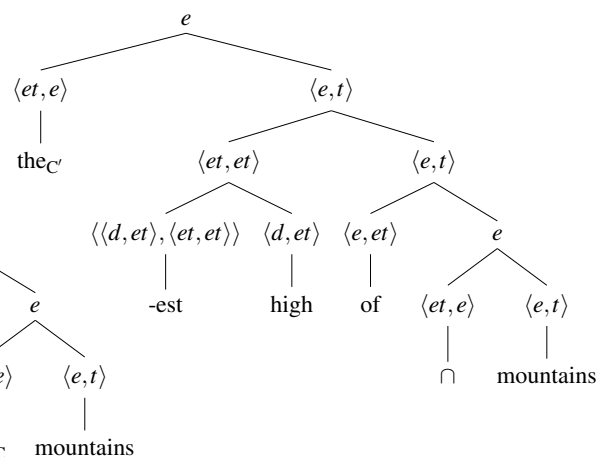
- (4) a. John climbed the highest one of the mountains.
 b. Of the mountains, John climbed the highest one.
 c. * John climbed the highest one of mountains.

Based on syntactic evidence shown above, I posit the underlying structure shown in the trees below.

(5) the highest of the mountains



(6) the highest of mountains



Based on this constituency, I coin a new denotation of the superlative morpheme *-est* is adapted from Heim (1999), where I change the order of the interpretation of the arguments.

$$(7) \quad \llbracket est \rrbracket = \lambda R_{\langle d, et \rangle} \lambda H_{\langle e, t \rangle} \lambda x : H(x) \wedge \forall y \left[\begin{array}{c} H(y) \wedge \\ \exists d \left[R(d)(y) \right] \end{array} \right] . \exists d \left[\begin{array}{c} R(d)(x) \wedge \\ \forall y \left[\left[H(y) \wedge y \neq x \right] \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y) \right] \end{array} \right]$$

In this construction, *of* is explicitly denoting the comparison class *H*, and is assigned the denotation below.

$$(8) \quad \llbracket of \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda y [y \sqsubset x]$$

In this representation of the superlative, the ambiguity in (2a) can be derived from from different contextual domains supplied by *the* (9).

$$(9) \quad \llbracket the \rrbracket = \lambda f_{\langle e, t \rangle} . \lambda x [f(x) \in C]$$

In (2b) the bare plural in the *of*-complement does not have the definite determiner to supply the contextual domain, and it gets the kind reading that is typical of bare plurals, which restricts the comparison class to all possible mountains. This framework where the comparison class is determined by the contextual domain restriction, rather than scopal relations derived by movement, also allows for the various *de re/de dicto* readings that are used as the primary evidence against the Contextual Dependency Analysis. It also accounts for the required absolute reading in the Kind *of*-complement, while allowing the absolute/relative ambiguity in the Partitive *of*-complements.

References

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