

# Comparative Superlatives<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Preamble

In a talk presented at the Fifth Groningen Round Table on the Representation of (In)definiteness I argued that certain phrases that I called “non-listed generalized lexical integers” could only contain indefinite NPs. In his comments Jim Huang noted that this claim squared well with Hornstein and Weinberg’s (1981) observations concerning preposition stranding. However, he also pointed out a problem posed by the following paradigm:

- (1) a. Who did you take a picture of?
- b. \*Who did you take the/every picture of?
- c. Who did you take the best picture of?

The problem is that (1c) is a misfit. Superlatives are presumably definite; nevertheless, (1c) is grammatical on a par with (1a), as opposed to (1b).

The answer I started sketching on the spot was as follows. Consider what (1c) really means. By mechanically applying the standard rules of interpretation one would predict that (1c) is used in the following situation:

- (2) A person, unknown to us, has various pictures, one of which is the best. You took this picture. We want to know who this person is.

But a moment of reflection shows that (1c) does not mean this. Rather, it means something like the following:

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- (3) You took pictures of various persons. Which of these pictures came out best? I.e., Who did you take a better picture of than you took of anyone else?

Once we got this far we also have an intuitive understanding of why (1c) may be grammatical. At the level of picture-taking we do not have any definite “best picture”. The comparison that makes this object “the best” arises at a different level. Thus we can imagine that at the crucial level the object of take is, or counts as, an indefinite.

This paper is an attempt to make this answer coherent. I will make the following two main claims:

- (4) a. Under syntactically specifiable conditions superlatives take sentential scope.  
b. Sentential scope superlatives are necessarily indefinite.

Huang’s example will keep coming back during the discussion. We will see that only a particular implementation of the above claims may account for the grammaticality of (1c) without running into circularity.

## 2 The role of WH/FOCUS

For obvious reasons, I will call reading (3) on which (1c) is grammatical the comparative reading of the superlative, as opposed to reading (2), which I will call the absolute reading. The first question to ask is whether superlatives are always ambiguous between these two readings.

In order to get a clear picture of the fundamental data, it seems expedient to take Hungarian as a point of departure. Hungarian makes a surface syntactic distinction between sentences in which no FOCUS assignment took place and sentences in which the abstract FOCUS feature was assigned to a constituent. FOCUS phrases do not only receive a high pitch but are also moved into the same preverbal position as question words.<sup>2</sup> Now consider:

- (5) János meg-mászta a legmagasabb hegy-et. (no FOCUS)  
John pfx-climbed the highest mountain-acc  
‘John climbed the highest mountain  
= John climbed Mt. Everest’

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Horvath (1981), É. Kiss (1981), and lots of further literature on FOCUS in Hungarian.

- (6) János mászta meg a legmagasabb hegy-et. (JÁNOS = FOCUS)  
 John climbed pfx the highest mountain-acc  
 ‘JOHN climbed the highest mountain  
 = It was John who climbed Mt. Everest or  
 = John climbed a mountain that was higher than what anybody else climbed’
- (7) Ki mászta meg a legmagasabb hegy-et? (WH)  
 who climbed pfx the highest mountain-acc  
 ‘Who climbed the highest mountain?  
 = Who climbed Mt. Everest? or  
 = Who climbed a mountain that was higher than what anybody else climbed?’

Sentence (5), which has no FOCUS or WH, is unambiguous: “the highest mountain” has to be the highest among mountains. Sentences (6) and (7), which have a FOCUS or WH phrase, respectively, are ambiguous: in addition to the former, absolute reading, they also have a comparative reading, according to which “the highest mountain” only needs to be the highest among mountains climbed by somebody.

Secondly, consider the following paradigm (I will be interested only in the comparative readings):

- (8) Ki kapta Pétertől tavaly a legkevesebb levelet?  
 who got Peter-from last year the fewest letters  
 ‘Who got the fewest letters from Peter last year?  
 = Who got fewer letters from Peter last year than how many letters anyone else got from him during the same year?’
- (9) Kitől kapta János tavaly a legkevesebb levelet?  
 ‘From whom did John get the fewest letters last year?  
 = From whom did John get fewer letters last year than how many letters he got from anyone else during the same year?’
- (10) Mikor kapta János Pétertől a legkevesebb levelet?  
 ‘When did John get the fewest letters from Peter?  
 = When did John get fewer letters from Peter than how many letters he got from him during any other period?’

This paradigm shows that we are dealing with a grammatical, rather than merely contextual phenomenon. If the ambiguity of (6) and (7) were due merely to differences in what happens to count as a relevant universe of discourse, we ought to expect the “frame of comparison” to vary randomly. But it does not: it varies precisely with which constituent of the sentence is WH-



- (12) John climbed the highest mountain.  
 (18) John climbed the HIGHEST mountain.  
 (19) John showed the highest mountain to Bill.  
 (20) John showed the highest mountain to BILL.  
 (21) JOHN showed the highest mountain to Bill.

The subject is not the unmarked target of FOCUS assignment -- in order to get the comparative reading, however, it seems possible to take John to be FOCUS in (12). This is not so in (18), though, because in (18) the highest already bears overt FOCUS accent: (18) seems unambiguous on the absolute reading. Now take sentences in which the final constituent, i.e. the unmarked target of FOCUS assignment, is not the superlative. It appears that in case the flatly intoned (19) has a comparative reading, this reading is the same as that of (20) --- with Bill determining the frame of comparison rather than that of (21) -- with John determining the frame of comparison. The reason seems to be that one ought to make a prosodic effort to get FOCUS on the subject in this case.<sup>4</sup>

In view of these considerations I will assume that flatly intoned sentences like (12) are structurally ambiguous: (12) may or may not have the abstract FOCUS feature assigned to John. In case FOCUS is assigned to it, the comparative reading is available; in case FOCUS is not assigned, the comparative reading is out. Thus I will maintain that (11) is valid for both Hungarian and English. In what follows I will use capital letters to indicate FOCUS assignment, and not accent. In case no capitals are used, the sentence is meant to have no FOCUS feature assigned.

After this uneducated excursus into English phonology, let me turn to the generalization stated in (11). The reason why WH/FOCUS is necessary in order for the comparative reading is, presumably, that WH/FOCUS~E plays a crucial role in defining a “frame of comparison”. The question is: why and how does WH/FOCUS do this?

Prior to going into any finer details, a fairly obvious answer suggests itself. Rooth (1984)

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that Barbaud (1976) goes as far as marking (i), as opposed to (ii), ungrammatical:

- (i) \* Nestor parle le moins fort.  
 (ii) C'est Nestor qui parle le moins fort.

I am grateful to Richie Kayne for pointing out this work to me.

develops a proposal according to which the pragmatic function of FOCUS phrases and question words is to introduce a set of relevant alternatives into the discourse. He then implements this idea in a strictly semantic definition of presupposition sets, and provides an account of “association with FOCUS” in the case of even, only, quantifier scope etc. Now it is easy to imagine that the contingency of the comparative reading is just another “association with FOCUS” phenomenon, and therefore all we need to do is to work out the details in Rooth’s framework.

Still without going into any further details, however, we may note a problem here. Rooth points out that most of his results could be achieved on a GB-type approach to WH/FOCUS, according to which the presence of the WH/FOCUS feature triggers movement, in syntax or at LF. However, GB has to stipulate that even and its brothers must associate with a variable in a particular fashion. On the other hand, he makes presupposition sets part of the semantics of these words, and given that he links presupposition sets to this pragmatic notion of introducing relevant alternatives, he actually explains why “association with FOCUS” is necessary.

Suppose now that all the further details can equally well be handled in Rooth’s framework and in a GB-type framework. Then we are entitled to adopt Rooth’s framework for comparative superlatives if the explanation he gives for “association with FOCUS” carries over to this case. It appears, however, that it does not carry over. Note that in (11) I stated the generalization in terms of WH/FOCUS, rather than in terms of question-word/FOCUS. This difference may be crucial. In GB-terms, interrogative and relative WH’s are alike in that both trigger movement and therefore give rise to a proposition containing an empty category (variable). On the other hand, Rooth does not generalize over interrogative and relative WH’s, given that the pragmatic function that can be naturally attributed to the first cannot naturally be attributed to the second. Now, the question is: does the presence of a relative WH-word license the comparative reading of the superlative?

- (22) We should console the girl who got the fewest letters.  
 (23) I have seen the girl from whom Peter got the fewest letters.

It appears that (22) and (23) do have the same comparative readings as the corresponding

questions would, i.e.:<sup>5</sup>

(22') We should console the girl who got fewer letters than anybody else.

(23') I have seen the girl from whom Peter got fewer letters than from anybody else.

Another relevant case to look at would be the tough-construction;<sup>6</sup> I have not been able to get hold of conclusive data about it so far, however. In view of the behavior of relative WH's, though, it seems already justified to refrain from adopting Rooth's framework for comparative superlatives, and to suggest the following:

(24) WH/FOCUS license the comparative reading of the superlative because they give rise to a proposition containing a variable, and the "frame of comparison" can be defined in terms of this open formula.

### 3 Syntactic restrictions

In (11) I merely stated that the comparative reading arises "in the environment of" WH/FOCUS. In this section I will review the English data that I am aware of, concerning what "in the environment of" precisely means. To make the examples easier to judge, I will use WH-movement, rather than FOCUS; moreover, I will stick to superlatives like the fewest. The fewest does not easily allow the absolute reading, and therefore the question whether some configuration allows the comparative reading reduces to judgment concerning plain grammaticality. Given that I am not a native speaker, and many of the relevant configurations cannot be tested in Hungarian, the claims in this section are based on work with informants. I will be grateful to anyone who points out the mistakes I possibly made in collecting and interpreting my data.

I will refer to the empty category left behind by WH/FOCUS movement as the "licensing variable". The most perspicuous generalization seems to be as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that in Hungarian, where relative WH's do not go to the same position as interrogative WH's and focussed constituents, the analogues of (22)-(23) must have the superlative focussed in the relative clause. I cannot explain this; however, this phenomenon seems reminiscent of a case I discuss in Szabolcsi (1984b) in connection with the neutralization of the DE.

<sup>6</sup> The potential interest of tough-constructions was pointed out to me by J. Higginbotham, N. Chomsky, and I. Haïk.

- (25) In order for the comparative reading to obtain, the licensing variable must be a clausemate of the superlative, in a sense to be specified below.

Consider the following examples:

- (26) a. \*Who e said [that you got the fewest letters]?  
 b. \*Who did you warn the fewest people [that you were going to arrest e]?  
 c. Who did you claim [e [e got the fewest letters]]?

In (26a) WH-movement took place from a clause higher, in (26b) from a clause lower than where the superlative is, and both sentences are ungrammatical, although the WH-movement part itself is legitimate in both cases. In (26c) the WH-phrase comes from a clausemate position. The fact that it is moved out of that clause does not hurt; note, however, that the “frame of comparison” does not extend with it to the matrix clause:

- (26c') ‘Who did you claim got fewer letters than anybody else got?’  
 \*‘Who did you claim got fewer letters than you claimed anybody else got?’

The clausemateness requirement needs to be made more precise, however, in view of the following:

- (27) a. Who e expected [PRO to get the fewest letters]?  
 b. Who e expected [Mary to get the fewest letters]?  
 c. Who e demanded [that you get the fewest letters]?

In (27) the superlative is located in an infinitival or subjunctive clause. WH-movement from the matrix clause licenses the comparative reading, however; moreover, the frame of comparison extends to the matrix clause:

- (27a') ‘Who expected to get fewer letters than anybody else expected to get?’  
 (27b') ‘Who expected Mary to get fewer letters than anybody else expected her to get?’  
 (27c') ‘Who demanded that you get fewer letters than anybody else demanded that you get?’

Supposing that infinitives and subjunctives differ from indicatives in that they have no independent tense, (25) can be modified as follows:

- (28) In order for the comparative reading to obtain, the licensing variable must be in the same domain with independent tense as the superlative.



Are there any restrictions on the position of the superlative, or on the relative positions of the superlative and the licensing variable? As far as I can see, there are not. As for the superlative itself, consider:

- (29) a. When did the fewest people want to vote?  
 b. When were the fewest people killed?  
 c. When did the fewest guests arrive?  
 d. When do you expect the fewest guests to arrive?

The subject position tends to be critical; nevertheless, it seems the sentences are equally acceptable regardless of whether the superlative is a non-derived subject, a passive subject, an ergative subject or an ECM subject. As for the relative positions of the superlative and the licensing variable, the critical question is whether the licensing variable has to c-command the superlative. Several of the previous examples indicate that it need not; consider also the following:

- (30) a. Who did the fewest witnesses see e?  
 b. Who did you expect the fewest people to like e?

It is to be noted, though, that there is (to my knowledge) one type of WH-word that fails to license the comparative reading:

- (31) \*Why do the fewest children cry?  
 ‘Why do fewer children cry than how many children cry for any other reason?’

The reason may very well be that why does not leave a trace, or at least not within the relevant domain. This assumption has independent justification in French and in Hungarian.

The data concerning multiple interrogation are unfortunately much fuzzier. Take (32):

- (32) Who got the fewest letters from whom?

The reaction to this sentence comes in three varieties:

- (32’) a. \*  
 b. ‘For which x and y, x got fewer letters from y than anybody else got from anybody else?’  
 c. ‘For every x, from whom did x get fewer letters than from anybody else?’

Unfortunately, Hungarian is of no help in this case. Despite superficial appearances, Hungarian may not have the same kind of multiple interrogation as English. All WH-words are fronted but, as E. Kiss observes, the most reasonable interpretation of (33a) mimics wide scope universals in English:

- (33) a.    Ki     kit     látott?  
           who  whom saw  
           ‘For every x, for which y, x saw y’

If we put a comparative superlative in such sentences, they are perfect but unambiguously have the kind of interpretation given in (32’c):

- (33) b.    Ki     kit     látott a     legtöbbször?  
           who  whom saw  the    most frequently  
           ‘For every x, for which y, x saw y more frequently than how frequently x saw anyone else’

Although the problem is important, for the time being I will leave it at that.

#### 4 Indefiniteness data

Still remaining within the realm of data, let me now turn to the indefinite behavior of comparative superlatives. We have already seen at the outset that a comparative superlative may occur in a “definiteness effect context”, while an absolute superlative cannot (cf. (1c), (2), (3)).

Let us see some further diagnostic examples:

- (34) a. \*Yesterday there were the fewest guests.  
       b. There were the fewest guests YESTERDAY.  
           ‘There were fewer guests yesterday than on any other day’.  
       c. When were there the fewest guests?
- (35) a. \*Yesterday there was the largest box of chocolate on the table.  
       b. There was the largest box of chocolate on the table YESTERDAY.  
           ‘There was a larger box of chocolate on the table yesterday than on any other day’.  
           \*‘It was yesterday that the largest box of chocolate (there) was on the table’.  
       c. When was there the largest box of chocolate on the table?

Examples (34) contain a superlative that has no absolute reading. The version with no WH/FOCUS is clearly out; the versions with WH/FOCUS are clearly in and have the comparative reading. Examples (35) contain a superlative that does have an absolute reading, so we can actually see whether this reading is possible in a definiteness effect context. (Obviously, the idiomatic sense of the largest ..., i.e., ‘a very large...’ is to be ignored.) The ungrammaticality of (35a) and the only possible reading of (35b,c) shows that the absolute reading is unavailable. The comparative reading is again systematically possible, however. A quick look at other diagnostic contexts:<sup>7</sup>

- (36) a. \*John has the sister.  
 b. \*John has the smartest sister.  
 c. JOHN has the smartest sister.  
 d. Who has the smartest sister?
- (37) a. \*You met Peter those years ago.  
 b. \*You met Peter the fewest years ago.  
 c. You met PETER the fewest years ago.  
 YOU met Peter the fewest years ago.  
 d. Who met Peter the fewest years ago?  
 Who did you meet the fewest years ago?

No comments are necessary to show that we have the same results.

The suspicion may arise that introducing a WH/FOCUS phrase may actually neutralize the definiteness effect and hence these contexts are not really diagnostic. If this were the case, however, then the absolute readings of the superlatives and other definites should also be grammatical in these examples, which they are not. Moreover, it is possible to show in Hungarian that comparative superlatives are perfectly grammatical in DE-contexts that do not ever allow neutralization.

Now note that it has been claimed sometimes in the literature that superlatives are not really definite because they get their definite article by sort of default, rather than by choice or by deicticity. Given that those authors have never considered the existence of a comparative reading, their claim concerning the indefiniteness of superlatives must be understood with respect to the standardly known absolute reading. The material we have just reviewed shows that

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<sup>7</sup> de Jong and Verkuyl (1984) attribute the observation that relational have and ago create a definiteness effect in English to Barbara Partee.

this claim is false: superlatives on the absolute reading behave like definites -- only superlatives on the comparative reading behave like indefinites. The examples that induced these claims presumably involve undetected comparatives, or idiomatic cases.

In order to pave the way for trying to account for how the comparative reading comes about, let us now return to Huang's example:

- (1) c. Who did you take the best picture of?

Remember that this is also a definiteness effect context in the sense that WH-movement is only possible if the object of take is indefinite. However, the fact that it is precisely WH-movement that makes this context sensitive to definiteness makes it very different from the examples we have so far examined in this section. Notice the following paradox, emerging on the basis of the empirical generalizations we have made so far:

- (38) The existence of the comparative reading is contingent on WH-movement -- the possibility of WH-movement in (1c) is contingent on the indefiniteness of the object, and hence the existence of the comparative reading, however.

### 5 Syntactic restrictions explained

Let me now repeat the generalizations made in Sections 2 and 3:

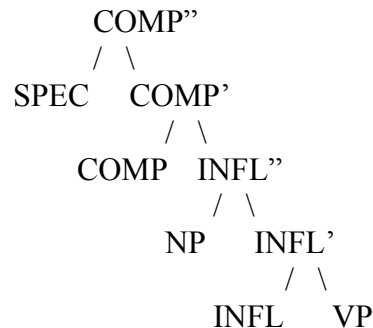
- (24) WH/FOCUS license the comparative reading of the superlative because they give rise to a proposition containing a variable, and the "frame of comparison" can be defined in terms of this open formula.
- (28) In order for the comparative reading to obtain, the licensing variable must be in the same domain with independent tense as the superlative.
- (39) There are no restrictions on the position of the superlative, or on the relative positions of the superlative and the licensing variable.

It appears that the following hypothesis can account for these data:

- (40) The derivation of the comparative reading involves LF-movement: the whole superlative NP, or the the -est part of it, is adjoined to INFL.

Let us assume the following mixture of May's (1984) and Chomsky's (1984) definitions:

- (41) a. The scope of A is the c-command domain of A.  
 b. A c-commands B iff every maximal projection that dominates A also dominates B.  
 c. A is dominated by a projection P iff A is dominated by every segment of P.  
 d. The structure of the sentence is as follows:



(where SPEC is the landing site of WH-movement, and COMP is the possibly 0 complementizer)

In view of these definitions, the scope of a phrase adjoined to INFL or INFL' is precisely INFL'', that is, S. Let us see how the assumption that the superlative is adjoined to INFL accounts for the data we have.

Take simple sentences first. It seems reasonable to assume that the “frame of comparison” is definable iff the scope of the superlative is a proposition containing a free variable. In view of (41) the scope of the superlative is S, and hence any WH/FOCUS trace in S can serve as a licensing variable. The position of the superlative within S does not matter: from whichever position we adjoin it to INFL, it will c-command its trace. The relative positions of the superlative and the licensing variable do not matter, since all we require is that the licensing variable be present in the required domain.

Take now complex sentences. I will assume that the adjunction of the superlative to INFL of the next higher clause causes an ECP violation if the superlative comes from a tensed indicative clause but not if it comes from an infinitival or subjunctive clause. If this is correct, then we have an account of the data in Section 2. I will repeat the examples for convenience, marking the scope of the superlative by underlining:

- (26) a. \*Who e said that you got the fewest letters?  
 c. Who did you claim e e got the fewest letters?  
 (27) a. Who e expected PRO to get the fewest letters?  
 c. Who e demanded that you get the fewest letters?  
 (30) b. Who did you expect the fewest people to like e?

To be honest, I do not see how the ungrammaticality of (26b) follows:

- (26) b. \*Who did you warn the fewest people that you were going to arrest e?

Maybe the scope of the superlative does not properly extend downwards ...?

Now we must consider the case of quantifiers, from various points of view:

- (42) a. Does quantifier movement leave a variable that licenses the comparative reading?  
 b. Is the assumption that S is a maximal projection compatible with May's (1984) results?

Let us begin with (42b). As far as I can see, May needs the assumption that S is not a maximal projection for the following reasons. He defines government as mutual c-command without an intervening maximal projection boundary, and he has the scope principle according to which if two quantifiers govern each other, they can be interpreted in either scope order. Then, he wants S-adjoined quantifiers, but not VP-adjoined quantifiers, to be able to take scope over WH in COMP. Now, if S is a maximal projection, then one segment of it intervenes between the S-adjoined quantifier and WH and thus mutual government is not possible. But notice that the scope principle could be replaced by Reinhart's (1979) original pure formulation:

- (43) If two quantifiers c-command each other they can be interpreted in either order.

Notice that if we now adopt (41) and (43) together, items in SPEC and items adjoined to S i.e. INFL" will have the same scope, namely, COMP", i.e. S'. Hence the required scope ambiguity is retained. On the other hand, an item adjoined to VP will have INFL", i.e. S-scope, so no undesired scope ambiguity is created. Hence, if one is convinced that May's treatment of the relevant examples is correct, his analysis can be perfectly maintained. And in case May's and Reinhart's conditions on scope ambiguity do not make undesirably divergent predictions elsewhere, Reinhart's is to be preferred, because it does not really involve any extra stipulation.

Having settled this, let us return to (42a). It appears that in case a quantifier is not also assigned FOCUS, it does not license the comparative reading:

- (44) a. \*Somebody got the fewest letters.  
 b. SOMEBODY got the fewest letters.  
 'There was somebody who got fewer letters than anyone else'.

- (45) a. \*Everybody got the fewest letters.  
 b. EVERYBODY got the fewest letters.  
 ‘Everybody got fewer letters than anyone else’.

Of course, (44b) is not necessarily true, and (45b) is necessarily false. Nevertheless, it appears these sentences can have the meanings I ascribe to them, but, crucially, only with FOCUS. One reason why (44a) and (45a) are out may be that QR does not leave an appropriate variable behind. Another possibility is to say that the variable they leave counts as bound within S. I will not pursue either of these possibilities here, so the question is left open.

Finally, it is to be noted that the assumption that the superlative adjoins to INFL, rather than to S or VP (as quantifiers do on May’s account) is also a stipulation, even if an expedient one. All I have to say now is that I somehow feel that this stipulation is intuitively correct, in view of how I understand the relevant comparisons to be made. But I am aware that feelings do not count as arguments, so (40) remains a stipulation for the time being.

## 6 Indefiniteness explained

Remember now that we have no account of either the indefiniteness property or paradox (38) yet. Let us begin with (38).

The vicious circle presented in (38) could be broken in the following way. Suppose that superlatives on the comparative reading and superlatives on the absolute reading do not start out as the same animal. Rather, the absolute superlative is always definite, whereas the comparative superlative is always indefinite -- but it is ill-formed unless it has a variable within its scope. On this view adjunction to INFL does not “create” a comparative superlative from an absolute one -- it only helps the originally comparative superlative acquire scope over an open proposition. The reason why this will break the vicious circle is as follows. In Who did you take the best picture of? the object of take starts out as an indefinite. Hence WH-movement is possible, and a licensing variable is created. Now if the superlative also adjoins to INFL, it has the licensing variable within its scope, and everybody is happy.

Notice that this assumption is perfectly compatible with the fact that the absolute reading (if available at all) is available both in sentences with, and in sentences without, a WH/FOCUS phrase, whereas the comparative reading is only available in sentences with a WH/FOCUS

phrase.

Now the question is as follows: do we have any independent justification for the assumption that the two kinds of superlative are distinct, and that the comparative superlative is originally indefinite? With this question we must turn to the characterization of the definite/indefinite distinction in general.

It has been argued by various people, including de Jong and Verkuyl (1984), Lyons (1984), Reed and Rothstein (1984), Szabolcsi (1984a), that the syntactic difference between so-called “definites” and “indefinites” is that the former have an N<sup>''</sup> specifier, whereas the latter have at most N<sup>''</sup> specifiers. There are also exceptions to this generalization, mentioned e.g. in Woisetschlaeger (1983) and Holmback (1984). I personally believe that some of the exceptions, like There was the perfect man for Mary at the party are not horribly serious because they cannot be reproduced e.g., in Hungarian, which may mean that a certain amount of language specific idiomaticity is involved. Note, however, that in case comparative superlatives have the same structure as absolute superlatives and are nevertheless indefinite, then they constitute a glaring counterexample to the N<sup>''</sup>/N<sup>''</sup> distinction, given that their indefinite behavior is entirely systematic and holds across languages.

One solution to this puzzle might be to say that INFL-adjunction moves the the -est portion of the superlative NP, i.e., that we start out with an NP having an N<sup>''</sup> specifier but end up with one having no (non-empty) N<sup>''</sup> specifier. Notice, however, that this would not resolve paradox (38). What we need is an NP that is indefinite from the very beginning. This can be achieved in one way, namely, if we assume that the the -est portion is never in N<sup>''</sup> specifier position.

There happens to exist a piece of data in Hungarian that suggests that this assumption is correct, namely, the case of “NP-splitting”, cf. Szabolcsi (1983). The usual form of phrases like with two green horses is as follows:

(46) két      zöld    ló-val  
       two     green horse-with

Only the head N is case-marked and neither the numeral, nor the adjective is removable. There is another possibility, however, which is, statistically speaking, much less frequently exploited but





## 7 Conclusion

The claims I made in this paper can be summarized as follows:

- (50)
- a. Absolute superlatives have the the -est part as an N<sup>'''</sup> specifier, hence they are definite. The scope of the the -est is NP-internal.
  - b. Comparative superlatives have the the -est part as an N<sup>''</sup> specifier, hence they are indefinite. They are uninterpretable unless the -est takes scope over an open proposition.
  - c. The -est can adjoin to INFL at LF and hence acquire the intended scope. The syntactic restrictions on the availability of the comparative reading follow from the assumption of INFL-adjunction.

It is obvious that many ingredients of the syntax I am assuming are not spelled out yet. Let me, however, conclude this paper by mentioning two further questions.

First, notice that I only sketched a way in which comparative superlatives can plausibly acquire an interpretation -- I did not actually provide the semantics. The compositional treatment of the examples is by no means a trivial matter. Nevertheless, the analysis I provided seems to converge with Heim's (1985) independent results, who analyses (51):

- (51) [Of those three men] John recommended the youngest one to Bill.
- a. -est <John, those 3>  $\lambda x \lambda y$  [x recommended a y-young one to Bill]
  - b. -est (Bill, those 3)  $\lambda x \lambda y$  [John recommended a y-young one to x]
  - c. John recommended Iz [-est <z, those 3>  $\lambda x \lambda y$  [a y-young one (x)]]

Here of course, (a) and (b) correspond to the two possible comparative readings and (c) corresponds to the absolute reading. Given, however, that at this point I only have a handout of hers available, I am not entirely sure how she computes these formulae from the grammatically given subparts, and in general, what further details her proposal may or may not share with mine.<sup>8</sup>

Second, there is an obvious connection between the phenomenon of comparative superlatives and the phenomenon of elliptical comparatives discussed in Haik (1984), e.g.:

- (52) John saw Mary earlier than Bill.  
 ‘John saw Mary earlier than he saw Bill’.

Haïk proposes an LF copying procedure to account for her examples. My own work just did not seem to lead to a similar assumption. At this point it is not clear to me whether our topics are sufficiently different to require different treatments, or whether I overlooked something.

Comments are welcome.

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Dietmar Zaefferer for giving, and explaining, Heim’ s handout to me. A similar interpretation of superlatives was suggested to me by Jim Higginbotham, albeit without a derivation.

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