

## *Most* and *the most* in English, German and Swedish

This talk addresses two related puzzles concerning superlatives. As Hackl (2009) discusses, amount superlatives (e.g. English *most*, Swedish *mest/flest*) can have *relative* and *proportional* readings, illustrated in (1a) and (1b).

- (1) a. Gloria scored the most goals. [relative,\*proportional]  
→ Gloria scored more goals than anyone else did.  
b. Gloria scored most goals. [?relative,proportional]  
→ Gloria scored more than half of the goals.

As these examples show, the presence or absence of the definite determiner disambiguates in English: When there is no determiner, as in (1a), the sentence receives a relative (‘more than anyone else’) interpretation. When there is a determiner, as in (1b), the sentence receives a proportional (‘more than half’) interpretation.

German is different (Hackl, 2009). There is no variant like (1b) without the determiner, and both interpretations are available with the determiner (*die meisten*).

We show that Swedish exhibits yet a third pattern, which is the opposite of English. Amount superlatives *with* definiteness-marking have a proportional (‘more than half’) interpretation, while those *lacking* definiteness-marking have a relative interpretation.

- (2) a. Gloria gjorde de flesta målen. [\*relative,proportional]  
→ Gloria scored more than half of the goals.  
b. Gloria gjorde flest mål. [relative, \*proportional]  
→ Gloria scored more goals than anyone else did.

Hackl’s (2009) theory of definiteness with amount superlatives – the only relevant proposal that we are aware of – cannot explain the Swedish pattern.

A further fact to be explained is that it is not just the determiner that is missing in (2b). In (2b), there is also no plural/definite suffix on the superlative or the noun, even though the noun in (2b) is plural. This pattern is also reflected with mass nouns, which take *mest* instead of *flest*:

- (3) a. Gloria åt det mesta godiset. [\*relative,proportional]  
→ Gloria ate most of the candy.  
b. Gloria åt mest godis. [relative, \*proportional]  
→ Gloria ate more candy than anyone else did.

Degree superlatives also lack definiteness marking entirely under relative interpretations, as mentioned by Teleman et al. (1999, II, §44,§46) under the heading of “indirekt urval”:

- (4) Jönköping hade bäst urban miljö.  
→ Jönköping had a better urban environment than any other city.

The absence of definiteness marking here is thus more extreme than in constructions like *förra året* and *sista chansen*, where the determiner is missing but the adjective and noun still carry definiteness-marking.

According to ‘DP-external’ analyses of relative readings (e.g. Hackl 2009), the superlative takes scope outside the object DP and *the* must be interpreted as *a* because its uniqueness presupposition is not satisfied by its complement. This kind of analysis makes the right predictions for Swedish; it correctly predicts that the DPs in question are completely indefinite. We argue that English, however, should receive a ‘DP-internal analysis’ on which the superlative is interpreted inside the DP. This explains why English uses *the most* where Swedish uses *mest/flest*.

## References

- Hackl, M. (2009). On the grammar and processing of proportional quantifiers: *most* vs. *more than half*. *Natural Language Semantics*, 17:63–98.
- Teleman, U., Hellberg, S., and Andersson, E. (1999). *Svenska Akademiens Grammatik*. Svenska Akademien/Norstedts, Stockholm.