

Superlative Movement in Puerto Rican Spanish

In Spanish there is an ambiguity between the readings of comparative and superlative adverbs, due to the fact that they correspond to the same morpheme. Spanish exhibits variability in the position of these superlative/comparative adverbs in relative clauses. In most varieties of Spanish the superlative/adverbs can only appear within their embedded clause; however, I present evidence from Puerto Rican Spanish where superlatives can move outside of the embedded clause, while the comparative cannot. In the light of this superlative movement that Puerto Rican Spanish exhibits, I propose that the higher in the derivation that a superlative/comparative adverb appears, the stronger the preference for a superlative reading.

Consider the following sentences with relative clauses:

- (1) Juan es el que corre **más**.
 John is the that runs more/most
 John is the one that runs more/most.
- (2) Juan es el que **más** corre.
 John is the that most/more runs
 John is the one that runs most/more.

The Spanish morpheme *más*, as in other Romance languages, is ambiguous in that it allows for either the comparative reading corresponding to English *more* or the superlative reading corresponding to English *most*. The same ambiguities arise with other adverbs and adjectives as well, such as *menos* (less/least), *mejor* (better/best), *peor* (worse/worst). Sentences containing these elements are often disambiguated by context, but as stated in (1) and (2) both the superlative and comparative readings are acceptable. That being said, there seems to be a slight preference for the superlative reading in (2), whereas a preference for the comparative reading is present in (1), where *más* appears in post-verbal position. This preference becomes clear when the compared element is incorporated into the clause:

- (3) Juan es el que corre **más que Pedro**.
 John is the that runs more than Peter
 John is the one that runs more than Peter.
- (4) *Juan es el que **más que Pedro** corre.
 John is the that more than Peter runs
 *John is the one that more than Peter runs.

When we add the compared element *que Pedro*, *más* is immediately disambiguated: it is a comparative adverb and cannot appear in the preverbal position with the overt compared element. The ungrammaticality of (4) can be explained in terms of focus. When a lower constituent is raised for informational reasons across a higher element this element is set into exclusive focus (Cinque 1999: 22). Therefore, the constituent *más que Pedro* may originate in preverbal position; however, because this constituent contains the compared element expressed by *que Pedro*, it must be assigned focus. From these examples we can extrapolate that the comparative *más* favors focus positions that are represented to the right of the verb of the embedded clause; whereas, superlative interpretations of *más* tend to be stronger the higher that it appears in the derivation.

Puerto Rican Spanish provides even more convincing evidence for the superlative morphemes' preference for higher positions in the derivation:

- (5) Juan es el **más** que corre.
 John is the most that runs

John is the one that runs the most.

The reading of (5) is very similar to that of (2), the main structural difference is that it exhibits an A-bar movement of the superlative AdvP out of the boundaries of the embedded clause and into the Spec of CP. Operator movement from inside of a relative clause is a quite common phenomenon, which is what we see in wh-movement, topicalization, etc. However, this type of superlative raising seems not to be as common. In fact, (5) happens to be ungrammatical in most varieties of Spanish. (5), (1), and (2) all accept the interpretation “John is the one who reads the most,” the main difference is that in (5) the comparative reading is no longer available. Furthermore, this type of sentence completely disallows the adding of a compared element in any position. The impossibility of the comparative phrase in this position seems to be evidence for the claim that higher positions in the derivation are preferred by superlatives rather than by comparatives. In Puerto Rican Spanish this seems to be true for all superlative constructions, even the ones that pied-pipe nouns, adverbs or adjectives with them. These nouns, adjectives, and adverbs cannot raise to Spec of CP on their own, they must be accompanied by a superlative element.

- (6) Escoge el ***(más) lindo** que esté.
Choose the most pretty that is-SUBJ.
Choose the one that is prettiest.

Kayne (2004) in his discussion of superlatives and definite articles in French and Italian provides evidence that can also account for the superlative pre-posing in Puerto Rican Spanish. Kayne suggests that *le livre le plus court* has the following derivation:

- (7) [sc [le livre] t_i]_j le [[plus court]_i C t_j] (Kayne 2004: 3)

Here we see superlative pre-posing (with pied-piped elements as well) to the Spec of CP, which he proposes to be limited to superlatives in French and Italian as well. This seems to be a similar type of movement to that in (6). Superlatives in French and Italian (and apparently Puerto Rican Spanish as well) can raise in a way that ordinary AdjPs cannot, which is reminiscent of how interrogative phrases can raise in a way that ordinary DPs cannot (Kayne 2004: 4). After the superlative is raised to the Spec of C, then a DP merges with the CP, leading to the presence of the definite article in the French superlative phrase as well as in the examples of Puerto Rican Spanish that we have seen thus far.

Examining the distributional characteristics of comparative and superlative adverbs in Spanish relative clauses, comparatives exhibit an apparent tendency to prefer post verbal positions within the relative clause, while superlatives prefer to move to higher positions in the derivation. Evidence for this can be found by examining sentences with compared elements, as in (3)-(4); however, the facts from Puerto Rican Spanish superlative pre-posing present even stronger support for superlatives' preference for higher positions.

REFERENCES

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