A SUPERLATIVE ARGUMENT FOR A MINIMAL THEORY OF DEFINITENESS

Elizabeth Coppock (University of Gothenburg) & David Beaver (University of Texas at Austin) • 24th Semantics and Linguistic Theory conference, 2014

CLAIM

Distinguishing definiteness from determinacy allows for an analysis of relative readings of superlatives that maintains the integrity of the while explaining their indefinite-like (indeterminate) behavior.

DEFINITENESS & DETERMINACY

Definiteness: a morphological category.
Determinacy: denoting an individual (= type e).

Definite descriptions: fundamentally predicative: presuppose uniqueness ([P] ≤ 1) but not existence.

\[
\text{th}_{(\text{ct, ct})} \rightarrow \lambda P \lambda x \{ \exists \{ P \} \land P(x) \} 
\]

Argumental definites acquire existential import via type-shifting operations:

- iota (gives determinate interpretations) \( P \rightarrow \exists x \{ P(x) \} \)
- ex (gives indeterminate interpretations) \( P \rightarrow \lambda Q \exists x \{ P(x) \land Q(x) \} \)

Anti-uniqueness effects involve ex option:

1. Anna didn’t give the only invited talk.
   ⇒ multiple invited talks
   ⇒ no ‘only invited talk’
2. Sue wanted to see the only statues (#of anyone), which I had seen.
   ⇒ multiple pictures of them.
3. Sue wanted to see the only mountain, and so did Mary. #Therefore Sue and Mary wanted to see the same statues.

SUPERLATIVE INDETERMINACY

(4) Gloria climbed the /**highest mountain.
Gloria: Relative: */*out of anyone
Absolute: */*out of all the mountains

(5) Gloria climbed the (most) mountains.
(most) unambiguously relative

- Indefinite distribution (Szabolcsi 1986, 2012):
- Who did you take the *best* picture of?
- There were the fewest guests yesterday.
- John has the *smallest* sister.
   - No presupposition failure (Heim 1999):
   - If nobody unambiguously climbs the highest mountain, the prize is not awarded.
   - Denial of existence:
   - Sue wanted to eat the {most, biggest, #large} apples (#of anyone), but there were no apples.
   - Anaphora:

   (11) Perhaps Sue climbed the {most, highest, snow-capped} mountains (#of anyone). I took a picture of them.
   (12) Mary didn’t bake the chocolate/#only/#most cupcakes, since John baked them.
   - Non-restrictive modification:
   - Sue wanted to see the {most, oldest, old} statues (#of anyone), which I had seen.
   (13) Mary didn’t bake the chocolate/#only/#most cupcakes, which are on the table.
   - Intensional contexts:
   - Sue wanted to see the {most, oldest, old} statues (#of anyone), and so did John. So Sue and John wanted to see the same statues.

DP-EXTERNAL STRUCTURE

Gloria estc βd climbed [◻, the d-high mountain ]

DP-INTERNAL STRUCTURE

Gloria climbed [for the estc high mountain ]

DEGP-INTERNAL STRUCTURE

Gloria climbed [for [keep the estc ] high mountain ]
estcC \rightarrow \lambda x \exists [ ∃ y \; y \; x \in C(G(d)(x) \land \neg G(d)(y)) ]

THREE STRATEGIES:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Relative</th>
<th>Absolute</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ex-situ(^1)</td>
<td>DP-external</td>
<td>DP-internal</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-situ(^2)</td>
<td>DP-internal</td>
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<tr>
<td>DegP(^3)</td>
<td>DegP-internal</td>
<td>DP-internal</td>
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</tbody>
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\(^1\) Szabolcsi, Heim, Hackl, i.a.
\(^2\) Farkas & Kiss, Sharvit & Stateva, Teodorescu, i.a.
\(^3\) Kriszka, Szabolcsi

PROS AND CONS:

- ‘Upstairs de dicto reading’ of (16): John needs to climb a 4000 ft mountain, others need to climb mountains of heights below 4000 ft.
- ‘Absolute reading’ (ex-situ):

\[
\text{estc}_C \rightarrow \lambda x \exists y \{ P(x) \land C(y) \land \forall y \{ x < y \rightarrow \neg P(y) \} \}
\]

\[
\text{ABSOLUTE READING:} \\
\text{estc}_C \rightarrow \lambda x \exists y \{ P(x) \land C(y) \land \forall y \{ x < y \rightarrow \neg P(y) \} \}
\]

In our logic, quantifier projection holds:

\[
\exists u \{ \psi \} \equiv \exists u \{ \psi \} \land \exists u \{ \psi \}
\]

Thus existentially bound presuppositions produce existential presuppositions, e.g., someone stopped smoking presupposes that someone smoked.

In (4), the uniqueness presupposition contains an existentially bound variable.

Resulting presupposition is ‘There is some height such that there is at most one mountain among the set under consideration of (at least) that height.’

Prediction derived: (4) is felicitous when there is a unique highest mountain. . . for relative reading add: that someone climbs.

SATL 22 • Teodorescu, V.A. 2009. The syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic interplay of adjectives and superlatives.

REFERENCES


UT Austin dissertation.