

Going Romance 2022
Workshop: Superlatives and definiteness
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Description

Our current knowledge on superlatives stems from Szabolcsi (1986) and Heim (1999), who have solidly established the crucial distinction between absolute and relative/comparative readings. Concentrating on English, Heim (1999) has proposed several possible semantic compositions, which differ depending on the choice we make regarding the position of the superlative (SUP) marker/functional head at LF (Logical Form): should it be interpreted in situ or instead should we assume that it raises to a position inside the DP (for absolute readings) and even further, outside the DP (for relative readings)? The debate is still ongoing.

A central problem in the literature of the past 20 years is the fact that despite their indefinite-like interpretation (Szabolcsi 1986), relative superlatives require the definite article in English. Krasikova (2012) proposed THE is not interpreted in D° but rather inside the DegP that in relative superlative readings. Krasikova's analysis is however questioned by empirical evidence coming from languages like French or Romanian, which have a DegP-internal THE that co-exists with THE in D° (Croitor & Giurgea 2016, Dobrovie-Sorin 2021). Also problematic is the fact that in certain languages THE is absent for the relative superlative reading of quantity adjectives, but possible (or even obligatory) with quality superlatives (Coppock 2019, Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea 2021). Another particularly difficult issue is the analysis of genuinely indefinite DPs that embed superlatives, e.g. *This class has a best student*. It is yet not clear whether the SUP appearing in this type of indefinite DP, which only allows absolute readings, has the same type of denotation as the SUP occurring in definite DPs (Herdan & Sharvit 2006). It is interesting to observe that indefinite superlatives seem to be allowed only in prenominal position and only if the superlative is expressed by a dedicated form (which can be affixal as -EST in English, Germanic or Scandinavian, or a phrasal constituent [_{SUP} *cel mai*] in Romanian, formed with the definite marker *cel* followed by the comparative (CMPR) marker *mai*).

With very few exceptions, the literature on superlatives has mostly concentrated on languages with dedicated superlative morphemes of the -EST type. It is only very recently that theoreticians got interested in those languages that lack dedicated superlative markers and where superlative meanings are conveyed by combining definiteness marking and a comparative (CMPR) form. All Romance languages exhibit this pattern – not exclusive to them – but it has been shown that this morphological uniformity corresponds to quite different syntactic configurations, depending on whether the definite article is part of a superlative constituent (as in French postnominal superlatives and in Romanian, see Croitor & Giurgea 2016, Dobrovie-Sorin 2021, Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea 2021) or instead realizes the determiner of the overall nominal projection (as in Ibero-Romance and Italian, see Loccioni 2018). On the semantic side, attempts have been made of building superlative meanings based on comparatives (see Dunbar & Wellwood 2016) but definiteness plays no part in them.

It has been recently observed that the investigation of Romance languages is particularly interesting for predicative superlatives, which have so far received less attention (see Loccioni 2018, 2019 on Italian, Spanish, and French, and Croitor & Giurgea 2016 on Romanian).

Topics include:

1. Crosslinguistic variation. (i) We would like to find out whether the difference between dedicated superlatives versus superlative meanings based on comparatives is accompanied by other constraints in the distribution and range of meanings available for superlatives. (ii) We would like to know whether the constraints on the relative superlative readings are different in languages with articles versus languages without articles (Slavic) or languages in which the definite article has been introduced relatively recently (Bulgarian).

2. Differences between adnominal and predicative superlatives
3. Modal superlatives (see Schwarz 2005, Romero 2013, Loccioni 2019): their syntax and semantic composition, and their adnominal vs predicate position
4. Compositional semantics. (i) What is the semantics of superlatives in those languages (e.g. French and Romanian) in which the definite article is a ‘superlative marker’ directly attached to the adjective in the comparative? How to get it compositionally? (ii) What is the compositional semantics of superlatives in those languages (e.g. Italian and Ibero-Romance) in which the definite article is the determiner of the nominal projection (noun modified by adjective in the comparative) rather than a ‘superlative marker’? For these languages, do we need to postulate a null counterpart of the superlative marker that surfaces as a definite in Romanian and French? (iii) How is the compositional semantics of adnominal vs predicative superlatives build?