

Relative readings of superlatives: scope or focus?

We provide an empirical argument that focus is necessary for relative readings of superlatives, even though an analysis based on scope alone can account for all the available readings. We also argue that with DP-external focus, syntactic economy considerations preclude DP-external scope of *-est*. The operator is thus more constrained at LF than previously argued, yet the range of superlative readings available cross-linguistically is still accounted for.

The Puzzle. By allowing the superlative morpheme, a quantifier over degrees with the semantics in (1), to take different scope within the clause, all of the readings of the superlative sentence in (2) are derived: the absolute (2a) and the relative (2b-c) readings, (Szabolcsi'86, Heim'99).

$$(1) \llbracket -est \rrbracket = \lambda C_{(e,t)}. \lambda D_{(d,et)}. \lambda x_e. \exists d [D(d)(x) \wedge \forall y \in C [y \neq x \rightarrow \neg(D(d)(y))]] \quad (\text{Heim, 1999})$$

$$\text{Presuppositions: } x \in C, \forall y [y \in C \rightarrow \exists d [D(d)(y)]]$$

(2) John got the longest book from Mary.

‘John got from Mary the book that was longer than all (relevant) books.’ *ABSOLUTE* (2a)

‘John got a longer book from Mary than anyone else got from her.’ *RELATIVE* (2b)

‘John got a longer book from Mary than he got from anyone else.’ *RELATIVE* (2c)

a	John got [_{DP} the [<i>-est</i> C] λd . <i>d</i> -long book] from Mary	$C \subseteq \{x: \exists d [x \text{ is a } d\text{-long book}]\}$
b	John [<i>-est</i> C] λd . λx . <i>x</i> got [_{DP} a <i>d</i> -long book] from M	$C \subseteq \{x: \exists d [x \text{ got a } d\text{-long book from M}]\}$
c	Mary [<i>-est</i> C] λd . λx . J got [_{DP} a <i>d</i> -long book] from <i>x</i>	$C \subseteq \{x: \exists d [J \text{ got a } d\text{-long book from } x]\}$

The scope analysis does not require that the effect of focus (disambiguating between the different relative readings, (3)) be represented at LF for the computation of the contents of the comparison set *C*. For Szabolcsi'86 and Heim'99 this is an advantage, because for the derivation of the relative reading (2b) of (4) they can avoid positing focus on a prosodically unmarked element: *who* or its trace. The Polish counterpart of (4), however, presents a puzzle – with neutral intonation, (5a), the presupposition that the comparison involves those individuals who got books of some length from Mary, (2b), is missing. For this reading, focus on the superlative expression is required, (5b).

(3)a. [JOHN]_F got the longest book from Mary. → Readings: (2a), (2b), but not (2c)

b. John got the longest book from [MARY]_F. → Readings: (2a), (2c), but not (2b)

(4) We should congratulate the boy who got the longest book from Mary.

(5)a. Powinniśmy pogratulować chłopcu, który dostał najdłuższą książkę od Marii.
we-should congratulate boy who got longest book from Mary

b. Powinniśmy pogratulować chłopcu, który dostał [najDŁUższą]_F książkę od Marii.

The Solution. We argue that the data in (5) provides evidence that *who*/trace is necessarily interpreted as focused at LF. Question answer congruence is a standard way of identifying foci, and we observe that in the answer to the multiple *wh*-question in (6a), the superlative *longest* either has to be part of the topicalized DP, (6b), or be the prosodic focus, (6b). In answers to multiple *wh*-questions, one of the F-marked constituents is the so-called *contrastive topic* (encoding the sortal strategy for the pair-list answer, Jackendoff'72, Wagner'12), *Jan* in (6c). In both (6c) and (5b), *Jan* and *who*/trace are not accented, but are interpreted as focused.

(6)a. Kto jaką książkę dostał od Marii?
who which book got from Mary

‘Who got which book from Mary?’

b. [Najdłuższą książkę]_{1-F/CT} *t*₂ dostał *t*₁ [JAN]_{2-F}.
longest book got Jan

c. [Jan]_{F/CT} dostał [najDŁUższą]_F książkę.

