

(The) most in Dutch: Definiteness and Specificity

Introduction

Dutch has two constructions that express *(the) most*:

- (1) Jan heeft **de** meeste bergen beklommen.
John has the_{pl.masc.} most mountains_{pl.masc.} climbed
'John climbed (the) most mountains.'

De meeste '(the) most' has two possible readings:

1. Absolute: "more than half"
2. Relative: "more mountains than the other climbers did"

- (2) Jan heeft **het** meeste bergen beklommen.
John has the_{sing.neut.} most mountains_{pl.masc.} climbed
'John climbed the most mountains.'

The expression with *het meeste* 'the most' shows strange behaviour:

- ☐ only the relative reading is available
- ☐ the neuter determiner *het* 'the' does not agree with the head noun *bergen* 'mountains'.

Two Claims

1. In Dutch, the distribution and the different readings of *de meeste* and *het meeste* are linked to **definiteness** and **specificity**.
2. In Dutch, there are two different structures underlying *de meeste* and *het meeste*. Either D agrees with the head noun, or it doesn't.

Test 1: Existential there

Only indefinite DPs can appear in sentences with existential *there* [Milsark(1974)], [Szabolcsi(1986)]:

- (3) a. Er is een man in de straat.
there is a_{indef.} man in the street
b. *Er is de man in de straat.
there is the_{def.} man in the street

Let's try this with *het meeste* and *de meeste*:

- (4) a. Er zijn het meeste bergen in Zwitserland.
there are the_{sing.neut.} most mountains in Switzerland
b. *Er zijn de meeste bergen in Zwitserland.
there are the_{pl.masc.} most mountains in Switzerland

→ *Het meeste* appears to be indefinite, *de meeste* definite.

Test 2: DP-internal focus

Only indefinite DPs can have DP-internal focus ([Pancheva and Tomaszewicz(2012)]):

- (5) ... dat JAN [_{DP}het meeste platen [_{PP}van Zappa]] beluisterd heeft.
... that John the most records of/by Zappa listened has
'... that JOHN listened to the most records of/by Zappa.' (relative)
- (6) ... dat Jan [_{DP}het meeste platen [_{PP}van ZAPPA]] beluisterd heeft.
... that John the most records of/by Zappa listened has
'... that John listened to more Zappa records than Captain Beefheart records.' (relative)

Some remarks:

- ☐ The relative reading with DP-internal focus (6) is not available in English.
- ☐ It can be found in Slavic languages if the DP is indefinite.
- ☐ If one puts a definite article in front of the DP, this relative reading disappears in Macedonian and Bulgarian.

Let's try this with *het meeste* and *de meeste*. The former can have a relative reading with DP-internal focus (6). The sentence with *de meeste* can only have an absolute reading:

- (7) ... dat Jan [_{DP}de meeste platen [_{PP}van ZAPPA]] beluisterd heeft.
... that John the most records of/by Zappa listened has
'... that John listened to most Zappa records.' (absolute)

→ *Het meeste* appears to be indefinite, *de meeste* definite.

Test 3: Scrambling

Non-specific indefinite DPs can't be scrambled.

- ☐ Specific: the speaker has a particular object in mind.
- ☐ Non-specific: the speaker does not have a particular object in mind. ([Hawkins(1978)])

Non-specific indefinites can't move to a position left of the adverb:

- (8) a. ...dat Jan gisteren de/één/een auto gekregen heeft.
...that John yesterday the/one/a car gotten has
'...that John got the/one/a car yesterday.'
b. ...dat Jan de/één/??een auto gisteren gekregen heeft.
...that John the/one/a car yesterday gotten has
'...that John got the/one/a car yesterday.'

Let's try this with *de meeste* and *het meeste*:

- (9) a. ... dat Jan gisteren de meeste bergen beklommen heeft.
... that John yesterday the most mountains climbed has
'... that John climbed (the) most mountains yesterday.' (relative/absolute)
b. ... dat Jan de meeste bergen gisteren beklommen heeft.
... that John the most mountains yesterday climbed has
'... that John climbed most mountains yesterday.' (absolute)
- (10) a. ... dat Jan gisteren het meeste bergen beklommen heeft.
... that John yesterday the most mountains climbed has
'... that John climbed the most mountains yesterday.' (relative)
b. *... dat Jan het meeste bergen gisteren beklommen heeft.
... that John the most mountains yesterday climbed has

→ Relative readings are non-specific indefinite.
→ Since *het meeste* is always indefinite, it only has a relative reading.

Analysis: AGR and *AGR

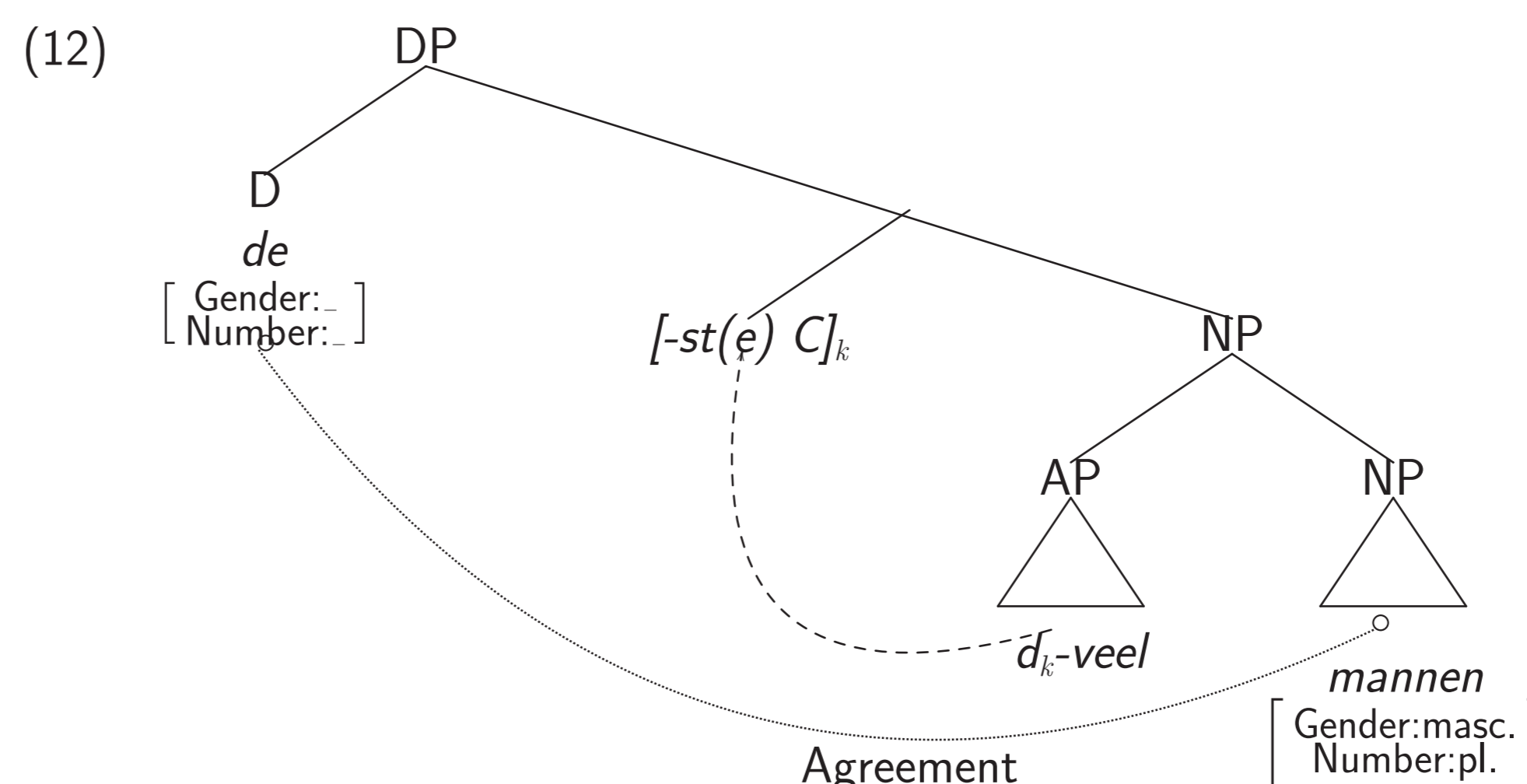
De meeste and *het meeste* behave differently in combination with plural nouns:

- (11) a. Jan heeft de (meeste) bergen beklommen.
John has the_{pl.masc.} most mountains_{pl.masc.} climbed
'John climbed (the) most mountains.'
b. Jan heeft het *(meeste) bergen beklommen.
John has the_{sing.neut.} most mountains_{pl.masc.} climbed
'John climbed the most mountains.'

I claim that there are two different structures underlying *de meeste* and *het meeste*.

AGR

In the AGR structure, the definite determiner agrees with the head noun. The structure in (12) is based on [Hackl(2009)]:

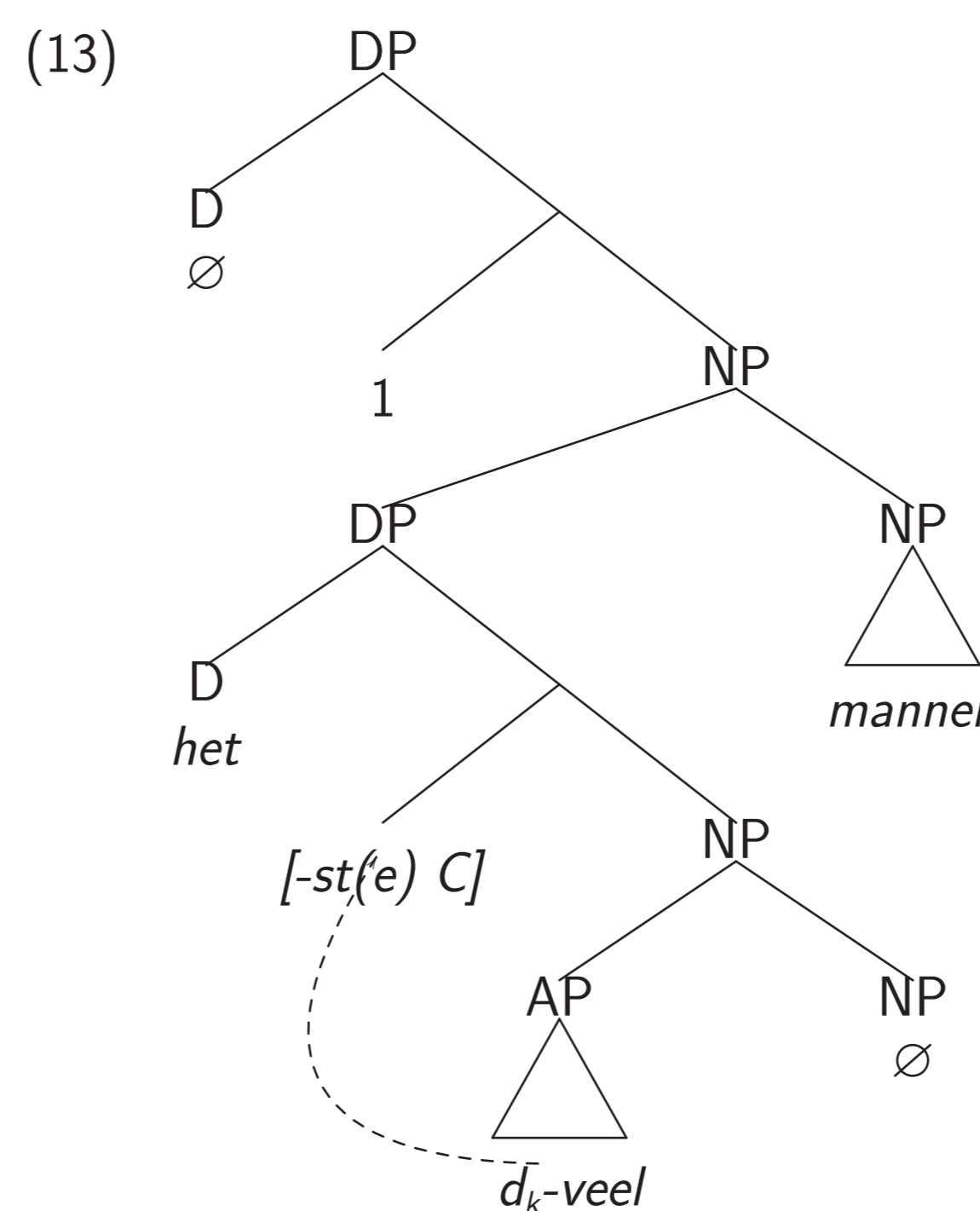


This structure explains the behaviour of *de meeste*:

- ☐ Following [Hackl(2009)], I assume that absolute readings require [-st(e) C] to stay inside the DP at LF.
- ☐ The head determiner of the DP is definite, which explains why *de meeste* does not appear in sentences with existential *there* and why it can't have DP-internal focus.
- ☐ In the relative reading, [-st(e) C] moves to [SPEC, VP] when the DP is indefinite [Heim(1999), Hackl(2009)].
- ☐ In Dutch, relative readings do indeed appear in positions associated with non-specific indefinite DPs.

*AGR

In *AGR structures, *het* is not the head of the DP:



This structure explains the behaviour of *het meeste*:

- ☐ The head of the DP containing *mannen* has a null head determiner, which makes the whole constituent a bare plural (and hence indefinite).
- ☐ The superlative morpheme [-st(e) C] moves up inside the lower DP, but it can only have scope over the null head noun and not over *mannen*.
- ☐ Another option is movement to 1, but then [-st(e) C] is no longer in the scope of the definite determiner.
- ☐ The absolute reading is thus blocked and the only option left for [-st(e) C] is to move out to [SPEC, VP], which produces the relative meaning.

Future research

- ☐ What is the internal structure of *de meeste* and *het meeste*?
- ☐ What is the status of the empty NP in *AGR structures?
- ☐ Look at similar expressions, such as *de/het minste* 'the fewest', *de meerderheid* 'the majority' etc.
- ☐ How can *de meeste* receive the relative reading?

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