(The) most in Dutch: Definiteness and Specificity

Introduction

Dutch has two constructions that express (the) most:

(1) a. Jan heeft de meeste bergen beklimmen.
   John has the most mountains 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) a. Jan heeft het meeste bergen beklimmen.
   John has the most mountains climbed.
   ‘John climbed (the) most mountains.’

The expression with het meeste ‘the most’ shows strange behaviour:
- only the relative reading is available
- the neutral 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 has agrees with the head noun, or it doesn’t.

Test 1: Existential there

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

(3) a. Er is een man in de straat.
   There is a man in the street.

b. Er is de man in de straat.
   There is the 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 most mountains in Switzerland.

b. Er zijn de meeste bergen in Zwitserland.
   There are the 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 [de meeste platen [van Zappa]] beluisterd heeft.
   ... that John the most records of Zappa listened has.
   ... dat JOHN listened to the most records of Zappa.’
   (relative)

(6) ... dat JAN [het meeste platen [van ZAPPA]] beluisterd heeft.
   ... that John the most records of Zappa listened has.
   ... dat JOHN listened to 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):

(7) ... dat JAN [de meeste platen [van ZAPPA]] beluisterd heeft.
   ... that John the most records of Zappa listened has.
   ... dat JOHN listened to 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.

Non-specific indefinites can’t move to a position left of the advert:

(8) a. ... dat Jan gisteren de éen/een auto gekregen heeft.
   ... that John yesterday the/one/a car gotten has.
   ... dat John het/one/a car yesterday got.

b. ... dat Jan de éen/?een auto gisteren gekregen heeft.
   ... that John the/one/a car yesterday gotten has.
   ... dat John het/one/a car yesterday got.

Let’s try this with de meeste and het meeste:

(9) a. ... dat Jan gisteren de meeste bergen beklimmen heeft.
   ... that John yesterday the most mountains climbed has.
   ... dat John het meeste bergen beklimmen heeft.
   ... dat John has the most mountains climbed.
   (relative/absolute)

b. ... dat Jan de meeste bergen beklimmen heeft.
   ... that John the most mountains climbed has.
   ... dat John hebben de meeste bergen beklimmen heeft.
   ... that John the most mountains climbed has.

(10) a. ... dat Jan gisteren het meeste bergen beklimmen heeft.
    ... that John yesterday the most mountains climbed has.
    ... dat John the most mountains climbed has.
    ... dat John de meeste bergen beklimmen heeft.
    ... that John the most mountains climbed has.

Relative readings are non-specific indefinites.
- 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 beklimmen.
    John has the most mountains climbed.
    ‘John climbed (the) most mountains.’

b. Jan heeft het (meeste) bergen beklimmen.
    John has the most mountains 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 noun. The structure in (12) is based on [Hackl(2009)]:

(12) [De meeste] [NP de [PP [AP [sing.neut.] het] [VP [PP [AP [pl.masc.] de] [VP [PP [AP [def.]] mannens [Gender:first] Number:pl]]]]]]

This structure explains the behaviour of de meeste:
- The head of the DP containing mannens has a null head determiner, which makes the whole constituent a bare plural (and hence indefinite).
- The relative morphology [-a(o) C] moves up inside the lower DP, but it can only have scope over the null head noun and not over mannens.
- Another option is movement to 2, but then [-a(o) C] is no longer in the scope of the definite determiner.
- The absolute reading is thus blocked and the only option left for [-a(o) 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 meerdere ‘the majority’ etc.
- How can de meeste receive the relative reading?

Bibliography