Towards a fine-grained analysis of Dutch *de/het meeste*

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Introduction

(1) Jan heeft de meeste bergen beklimmen.
   John has the\textsubscript{pl.masc.} most mountains\textsubscript{pl.masc.} climbed
   John climbed most mountains.

Two different readings:
1. Absolute: “John climbed more than half of the mountains”
2. Relative: “John climbed more mountains than the other climbers did”

Claim 1: In Dutch, the different readings are linked to definiteness and specificity.

(2) Jan heeft het meeste bergen beklimmen.
   John has the\textsubscript{sing.neut.} most mountains\textsubscript{pl.masc.} climbed
   John climbed the most mountains.

The article \textit{het} ‘the’ does not agree with the noun \textit{bergen} ‘mountains’.

Claim 2: In Dutch, there are two different structures underlying \textit{de meeste} and \textit{het meeste}. One has a D that agrees with the head noun, the other one does not.
Outline

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   b. Relative reading
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   b. Relative reading
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English superlatives

Analysis of superlatives by Heim (1999) and Szabolcsi (1986).

• Two different readings:
  - absolute reading
  - relative reading.
English superlatives: absolute reading

John climbed the highest mountain.

\[
[[\text{-est C};[d_i-\text{high mountain}]]] = \lambda x. \forall y \in C [y \neq x \rightarrow \max \{d: x \text{ is a } d_i-\text{high mountain}\} > \max \{d: y \text{ is a } d\text{-high mountain}\}]
\]
English superlatives: relative reading

John climbed the highest mountain.

\[ [[\text{-est } C]_i [\text{climbed } [d_i\text{-high mountain}]]] = \lambda x. \forall y \in C [y \neq x \rightarrow \max \{d: x \text{ climbed a } d\text{-high mountain}\} > \max \{d: y \text{ climbed a } d\text{-high mountain}\}] \]
English *most*

Analysis of *most* by Hackl (2009).

- *Most* is the superlative of *many*.
- Two different readings:
  - absolute (or proportional) reading
  - relative reading.
- The two different readings are triggered by the presence or absence of *the*.

(3) (a) John climbed most mountains. (absolute)
     (b) John climbed the most mountains. (relative)
English *most*: absolute reading

John climbed most mountains

\[ \lambda x. \forall y \in C \ [y \neq x \rightarrow \max \{d: \text{mountains}(x) \& |x| \geq d\} > \max \{d: \text{mountains}(y) \& |y| \geq d\} ] \]
John climbed the most mountains.

\[
\llbracket [-\text{est } C]_i [\text{climbed } \varnothing \text{ } d_i-\text{many mountains}] \rrbracket = \lambda x. \forall y \in C \ [y \neq x \rightarrow \\
\max \{d : \exists z [\text{mountains}(z) \ & |z| \geq d \ & \text{climbed}(x, z)]\} > \\
\max \{d : \exists z [\text{mountains}(z) \ & |z| \geq d \ & \text{climbed}(y, z)]\}
\]
Dutch *de meeste* and *het meeste*

- Analyse *de/het meeste* ‘most’ as the superlative of *veel* ‘many’.

**Definiteness and specificity**

- DPs with *de/het meeste* and relative readings are non-specific indefinite.
- DPs with *de/het meeste* and absolute readings are definite.
- Tests:
  1. Scramble the DP
  2. Existential *there*.

**Two syntactic structures**

- There are two syntactic structures underlying *de meeste* and *het meeste*:
  1. with a D that agrees with the head noun
  2. with a D that does not agree with the head noun.
Preamble: *de* and *het*, specificity

*De versus het*

(4) (a)  
\[ de \ man \quad - \quad de \ vrouw \]
   \[ \text{the man}_{\text{sing.masc.}} \quad - \quad \text{the woman}_{\text{sing.fem.}} \]

(b)  
\[ het \ huis \quad - \quad het \ geld \]
   \[ \text{the house}_{\text{sing.neut.}} \quad - \quad \text{the money}_{\text{sing.neut.}} \]

(c)  
\[ de \ \text{mannen} \quad - \quad de \ \text{vrouwen} \quad - \quad de \ \text{huizen} \]
   \[ \text{the men}_{\text{pl.masc.}} \quad - \quad \text{the women}_{\text{pl.fem.}} \quad - \quad \text{the houses}_{\text{pl.neut.}} \]

*Specificity*

Specific: the speaker has a particular object in mind.
Non-specific: the speaker does not have a particular object in mind.

(Hawkins 1978)
First test: scrambling

Non-specific indefinite DPs can’t be scrambled

(5) (a) ...dat Jan gisteren wat gekregen heeft.
...that John yesterday something got has
...that John got something yesterday.

(b) * ...dat Jan wat gisteren gekregen heeft.
...that John something yesterday got has

(6) (a) ...dat Jan gisteren de/één/een gitaar gekregen heeft.
...that John yesterday the/one/a guitar got has
...that John got the/one/a guitar yesterday.

(b) ...dat Jan de/één/??een gitaar gisteren gekregen heeft.
...that John the/one/??a guitar yesterday got has
...that John got the/one/a guitar yesterday.
Scrambling: *de meeste* versus *het meeste*

(7) (a) ...dat Jan gisteren de meeste bergen beklommen heeft. *(relative/absolute)*
     ...that John yesterday the most mountains pl. climbed has
     ...that John climbed (the) most mountains yesterday.

(b) ...dat Jan de meeste bergen gisteren beklommen heeft. *(absolute)*
     ...that John the most mountains pl. yesterday climbed has
     ...that John climbed most mountains yesterday.

(8) (a) ...dat Jan gisteren het meeste bergen beklommen heeft. *(relative)*
     ...that John yesterday the most mountains pl. climbed has
     ...that John climbed the most mountains yesterday.

(b) *...dat Jan het meeste bergen gisteren beklommen heeft.*
     ...that John the most mountains pl. yesterday climbed has
Scrambling: *het meeste*

(9) (a) ...dat Jan gisteren *het meeste geld* verloren heeft. (relative/absolute)
...that John yesterday the most *money$_{sing.neut}$* lost has
...that John lost (the) most money yesterday.

(b) ...dat Jan *het meeste geld* gisteren verloren heeft. (absolute)
...that John the most *money$_{sing.neut}$* yesterday lost has
...that John lost most money yesterday.
Second test: existential *there*

Only indefinite DPs can appear in sentences with existential *there.*

(10)(a) Er is een man in de straat.
there is a man in the street

(b) Er zijn mannen in de straat.
there are men in the street

(c)* Er is de man in de straat.
there is the man in the street
Existential *there*: *de/het meeste*

Only indefinite DPs can appear in sentences with existential *there*.

(11)(a) Er *is* het meeste geld in Monaco.
    there *is* the most money in Monaco

(b) Er *zijn* het meeste bergen in Zwitserland.
    there *are* the most mountains in Switzerland

(c)* Er *zijn* de meeste bergen in Zwitserland.
    there *are* the most mountains in Switzerland
Claim 1: definiteness and specificity

Claim 1

- DPs with *de/het meeste* and relative readings are non-specific indefinite.
- DPs with *de/het meeste* and absolute readings are definite.
Claim 2: two different syntactic structures

Claim 2

• There are two syntactic structures underlying de meeste and het meeste:
  1. AGR: with a D that agrees with the head noun
  2. *AGR: with a D that does not agree with the head noun.

(1) Jan heeft de meeste bergen beklimmen.  (relative/absolute)
John has the pl.masc. most mountainspl.masc. climbed
John climbed (the) most mountains.

(2) Jan heeft het meeste bergen beklimmen.  (relative)
John has the sing.neut. most mountainspl.masc. climbed
John climbed the most mountains.
• The determiner agrees with the head noun:

(12) (a) de meeste mannen
    thepl.masc. most menpl.masc.
(b) de meeste vrouwen
    thepl.fem. most womenpl.fem.
(c) de meeste huizen
    thepl.neut. most housespl.neut.
(d) het meeste geld
    thesing.neut. most moneysing.neut.
• D agrees with the NP in number and gender.
• [-st(e) C]_k moves out of the AP (Heim (1999), Hackl (2009)).
• [[-st(e) C]_k [d_k-veel bergen]] is the expected absolute reading.
• [-st(e) C]_k adjoins to VP (Szabolcsi (1986), Heim (1999), Hackl (2009)).
• [[-st(e) C]_k[[de d_k-veel bergen] beklommen]] is the relative reading.
• The determiner in *AGR does not agree with the head noun:

(13) (a) het meeste mannen
    the\textsubscript{sing.neut.} most men\textsubscript{pl.masc.}

    (b) het meeste vrouwen
    the\textsubscript{sing.neut.} most women\textsubscript{pl.fem.}

    (c) het meeste huizen
    the\textsubscript{sing.neut.} most houses\textsubscript{pl.neut.}

• The *AGR structure shows similarities with indefinite plurals. We assume that there is a null D in both cases:

(14) (a) Er zijn Ø het meeste bergen in Zwitserland.
    there are Ø the most mountains in Switzerland

(b) Er zijn Ø mannen in de straat.
    there are Ø men in the street
Null D in the highest DP accounts for the combination with existential *there*.

Anaphoric gender marking in Dutch (predicate) superlatives may be optional (Matushansky 2008).

This explains why there is no agreement between *het* and the null NP.

\[\text{[[[-st(e) C]_k [d_k-veel bergen]]bergen]}\] is not a valid absolute reading.
[\[-st(e) C\]_k adjoins to VP (Szabolcsi (1986), Heim (1999), Hackl (2009)).
• \([-st(e) C\]_k][[het d_k-veel bergen] beklommen]] is the relative reading.
• This is the only available reading for *AGR structures.
Conclusion

• In Dutch, *de/het meeste* has an absolute and a relative reading:
  - the different readings do not depend on the article
  - the DPs with relative readings are non-specific indefinite
  - the DPs with absolute (‘proportional’) readings are definite
  - there are two different syntactic structures underlying *de/het meeste*.

• Future research:
  - Research of English data (and other languages)
  - AGR and *AGR structure
  - Consequences for the semantics of *most* and *de/het meeste*
  - Similar expressions, such as *de/het minste, de meerderheid* etc.
Bibliography


Thank you!!!

http://www.xkcd.com

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