(The) most in Dutch: Definiteness and Specificity

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Introduction

Dutch has two constructions that express (the) most:

   John has the_most mountains_moving climbed
2. John climbed [de most] most mountains.

The sentence with de meeste [the most] has two possible readings:

1. Proportional: “more than half”
2. Comparative: “more mountains than the other climbers did”

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

In Dutch, comparative readings do indeed appear in positions associated with non-specific indefinite DPs.

Two Research Questions

1. Why does het meeste occur with a plural masculine noun?
2. Why does it only have a comparative reading?

Test 1: Existential there

Only indefinite DPs can appear in sentences with existential there [Milgram(1974), Szabolcsi(1980)]:

(5) Er is een man in de straat.
   There is a man in the street.
(6) *Er is de man in de straat.
   *There is the man in the street.

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

(7) Er zijn het meeste bergen in Zwitserland.
   There are the most mountains in Switzerland.
(8) *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: Scrambling

Non-specific indefinite DPs can’t be scrambled.

SPEC, the speaker has a particular object in mind.

Non-specific indefinites can’t appear in a position left of the adverb.

(9) a. . . . dat Jan gisteren de/een auto gekregen heeft.
    . . . that John yesterday the/a car gotten has
b. . . . dat Jan gisteren de/een auto gisteren gekregen heeft.
    . . . that John yesterday the/a car yesterday gotten has

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

(10) a. . . . dat Jan gisteren de meeste bergens geklimmen heeft.
    . . . that John yesterday the most mountains climbed has
    (comparative/proportional)

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

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)]:

The structure in (12) explains the behaviour of de meeste:

- Following [Hackl(2009)], I assume that proportional 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.
- In the comparative reading, [-st(e) C] moves to [SPEC, VP] when the DP is indefinite [Hoen(1999), Hackl(2009)].
- In Dutch, comparative 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 bergen 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 bergen.
- Another option is movement to 1, but then [-st(e) C] is no longer in the scope of the definite determiner.
- The proportional reading is thus blocked and the only option left for [-st(e) C] is to move out to [SPEC, VP], which produces the comparative meaning.

Questions and Work in Progress

1. What is the status of the empty NP in *AGR structures?
2. How can one account for the specificity effects?
3. Why is the movement of the superlative morpheme not visible in syntax?
4. Could the internal structure of meeste be more complex? [Bohadjik(2012)] claims that the superlative always contains the positive and the comparative.

Bibliography