
Title. Notes on comparatives and superlatives and related matters

Abstract. Suppose that Kim, Pat and Lee are runners. The sentence in (1) can be used to say at least three truth-conditionally distinct things, with satisfaction criteria roughly as in (1a)-(1c):

- (1) Kim wants to run the longest race.
- a. Kim wants to run the 3100 Sri Chinmoy Self-Transcendence race, the longest race in the world.
 - b. Kim wants to run a race that is longer than the races run by Pat and Lee.
 - c. The distance such that Kim wants to run a race of that length is greater than the distances such that Pat and Lee want to run races of those lengths.

The (1a) and (1b) readings are the so-called “absolute” and “relative” interpretations of superlatives, respectively, first discussed in Szabolsci 1986. The (1c) reading is a special case of the latter, sometimes referred to as the “upstairs *de dicto*” reading, and is argued by Heim (1999) to demand an analysis of the absolute/relative ambiguity in terms of the scope-taking properties of superlatives (see also Bumford 2018). Heim’s analysis assumes that superlatives compose directly with an adjectival root. This assumption, however, is in conflict with Bobaljik’s (2012) compelling arguments that superlatives are in fact complex, built out of a root and a comparative morpheme, an analysis that he calls the Containment Hypothesis. A simple application of Heim’s semantics to a structure compatible with the Containment Hypothesis cannot derive upstairs *de dicto* readings, and thus far no one has provided an alternative scopal analysis that can do so. In this talk, I provide such an analysis, building on previous work exploring the relative contributions of comparative morphemes and standard morphemes to comparative semantics (Alrenga, Kennedy and Merchant 2012, Schwarzschild 2020, Kennedy 2025). This approach may also provide the basis for an explanation of why the Containment Hypothesis should hold in the first place.

References

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