

Modal superlatives

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1. In what Larson (2000) calls *implicit relative* (IR) readings, the interpretation of *possible* in superlative noun phrases is very different from that of ordinary intensional adjectives such as *alleged* or *potential*. For example, (1) in its IR reading says that Mary bought the largest object that is actually a present and that it was possible for her to buy. Larson observes that IR readings have paraphrases where *possible* is postnominal and can combine with an overt infinitival clause. For example, (1) in its IR reading is equivalent to both (2)a and (2)b. Based on this equivalence, Larson explores a promotion-and-ellipsis (PE) analysis of IR readings, according to which (1) is derived from (2)b through promotion of *possible* to the prenominal position and ellipsis of its infinitival complement.

- (1) Mary bought the largest possible present.
- (2) a. Mary bought the largest present possible.
- b. Mary bought the largest present possible [for her to buy].

This paper presents a number of observations on IR readings with prenominal *possible* in superlatives that are unexpected under a PE analysis. It proposes an alternative account which analyzes *largest possible* as a word with the parse *large [est possible]*, and analyzes *[est possible]* as a degree operator much like bare *est* in the analysis of Heim (1994).

2. The first observation is that it is hard or impossible to interpret an overt postnominal infinitival clause as a complement of prenominal *possible*. For example, while (3)a can mean that Mary bought the largest present that anyone can carry, this interpretation seems unavailable in (3)b (where the infinitival is most naturally interpreted as a purpose clause). Under a PE analysis, this indicates that ellipsis is obligatory when *possible* promotes.

- (3) a. Mary bought the largest present possible [for anyone to carry].
- b. Mary bought the largest possible present [for anyone to carry].

The second observation is that IR readings with prenominal *possible* are impossible with analytic superlatives. For example, even though (4)a can mean that Mary bought the most expensive present that she could, (4)b can only mean that Mary bought the most expensive object that was possibly a present. Under a PE analysis, the question is why *possible* cannot promote in analytic superlatives.

- (4) a. Mary bought the most expensive present possible. IR
- b. Mary bought the most expensive possible present. *IR

The third observation is that the IR reading is unexpectedly absent when *possible* follows a morphologically complex superlative modifier of a type exemplified by *best-known*. Even though (5)a can mean that they hired the best-known philosopher they could, (5)b can only mean that they hired the best-known person who might be a philosopher.

- (5) a. They hired the best-known philosopher possible. IR
- b. They hired the best-known possible philosopher. *IR

3. The PE analysis is not logically incompatible with the observations presented above. But to sustain it, the relevant properties of ellipsis and promotion must be motivated on independent grounds and no such independent motivation seems available at present. This suggests that prenominal *possible* never involves promotion and ellipsis in the first place. An alternative account analyzes *largest possible* as a constituent, parsed as *large [est possible]*. This straightforwardly excludes IR readings with analytic superlatives and *best-known*, as the relevant

parse is unavailable in these cases. It also derives Larson's (2000) observation that *possible* in IR readings cannot be separated from (what looks like) the superlative adjective by another prenominal modifier. In addition, the analysis receives striking support from German, where the two adjectives in IR superlatives share one agreement suffix, as shown in (6)a; sentence (6)b, where each adjective agrees independently, does not have the IR reading.

- (6) a. Maria hat [das größte mögliche Geschenk] gekauft.
Mary has the.acc.n.sg largest possible.acc.n.sg present.acc.n.sg bought
 'Mary bought the largest present possible.' IR
- b. Maria hat [das größte mögliche Geschenk] gekauft.
Mary has the.acc.n.sg largest.acc.n.sg possible.acc.n.sg present.acc.n.sg bought
 'Mary bought the largest potential present.' *IR

4. A remaining question is how the present analysis derives the IR reading. As illustrated in (7), a possible answer assumes that [*est possible*] extracts from its noun phrase to take clausal scope, leaving behind a trace ranging over degrees and that the definite host noun phrase mutates into an indefinite. As shown in (8), the analysis assumes that the denotation of [*est possible*] maps a property of degrees to truth just in case this property applies to any degree in the actual world to which it applies in any modally accessible possible world. Thus (1) is true according to this analysis just in case whenever Mary bought an (at least) d-large present in some accessible possible world, then she also bought an (at least) d-large present in the actual world. This captures the IR reading.

- (7) [*est-possible*] λ_1 [Mary bought A [[large $t_{1,d}$] present]]
- (8) [[*est-possible* ϕ]]^w = True iff
 $\forall d$ [$\exists w'$ [Acc_w(w') & [[ϕ]]^{w'}(d) = True]] \rightarrow [[ϕ]]^w(d) = True]

5. The proposed logical syntax of [*est possible*] follows Heim (1994), who considers the same logical syntax for so-called comparative superlatives with bare *est*. However, the proposed meaning of [*est possible*] does not leave room for focus sensitivity of the sort reported for comparative superlatives with bare *est* in Szabolcsi (1986) and Heim (1994). This is correct. The truth conditions of IR superlatives are not sensitive to focus. To illustrate, (9)a says that Mary bought me a larger present than anyone else did, while (9)b says that Mary bought me a larger present than she bought anyone else. There is no analogous truth conditional contrast between the IR readings of the sentences in (10).

- (9) a. MARY bought me the largest present.
 b. Mary bought ME the largest present.
- (10)a. MARY bought me the largest possible present.
 b. Mary bought ME the largest possible present.

References cited:

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