

The stowaway of *the*: on different readings of superlative determiners

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In this paper I will (i) present two different readings that superlative determiners can have cross-linguistically, (ii) claim that the availability of one of those readings in a language is closely related to the existence of a definite determiner in the language, (iii) present some empirical evidence supporting the claim, and (iv) discuss an interesting feature of Macedonian and Bulgarian bearing on the issue.

Although this fact does not seem to be noticed in the semantic literature, not all superlative determiners behave like English *most*. On the other hand, it is quite obvious to anyone speaking (almost any) Slavic language, that Slavic superlative determiners actually behave quite differently, to the extent that (1d), the appropriate translation of (1a) to Slovenian, does not contain a superlative determiner but a noun *večina* corresponding to English *majority*.

(1a) has roughly the same meaning as (1b) or (1c). (1a) means that the number of pigs that are eating is greater than the number of pigs that are not eating, or, in a paraphrase that is useful theory-internally, that the number of pigs that are eating is greater than the number of remaining pigs.

Direct translation of (1a) to Slovenian is actually ungrammatical, since it contains no focused constituent. Focusing a direct object, for example, makes a sentence grammatical, as in (3), but the resulting sentence (3b) is not translatable to English as (3c). In fact, as can be seen from (3b), English translation is quite cumbersome.

- (1) a. Most pigs are eating.
b. More than half (of) the pigs are eating.
c. The majority of pigs is eating.
d. Večina pujsov jé. (Slovenian)
majority pigs eat
Most pigs are eating.
- (2) * Največ pujsov jé. (Slovenian)
most pigs eat
- (3) a. * Največ pujsov jé kumaro. (Slovenian)
most pigs eat cucumber
b. Največ pujsov jé *kumaro*. (Slovenian)
most pigs eat [cucumber]_{focus}
More pigs eat a cucumber than any other (contextually salient) vegetable.
(or: The plurality of pigs is eating a cucumber.)
c. Most pigs eat *a cucumber*.

The reading of the English superlative determiner *most* will be called the *majority* reading, whereas the Slovenian *največ* will be said to have the *plurality* reading. If the meaning of the majority reading is written in a suitable formal language—the language I have in mind is L*, an extension of first-order logic originally developed by Law and Ludlow [1985] and further discussed in Ludlow [1995]—it shows remarkable similarity to the representation of the definite determiner’s meaning, stated in Russelian terms. Since the representation of the plurality reading of *največ* is quite different from these, and

furthermore, since Slovenian lacks a definite determiner, it seems reasonable to conjecture that the availability of the majority reading is dependent upon the existence of a definite determiner in a language. In syntax-theoretic terms, both properties of a language seem to be dependent upon a single parameter.

The prediction seems to be borne out. All of the languages surveyed so far confirm the hypothesis. In English, German, Dutch, Hungarian, Finnish, Swiss German, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Farsi the definite determiner exists, and, as predicted, these languages also allow for the majority reading of their superlative determiner. Slovenian, Czech, Polish, Serbian, Chinese, Turkish and Punjabi, on the other hand, lack a definite determiner, and, as expected, also disallow the majority reading of their superlative determiner. (Incidentally, in all these languages the superlative determiner has the plurality reading, as described above. Whether this is a coincidence or reflects some deeper property of the language faculty remains an open issue.) Finally, there are a lot of languages trivially fulfilling the requirement, since they lack the superlative (and comparative) determiner altogether, for example Hebrew and Koromfe.

Macedonian and Bulgarian present a very interesting case in the group of languages with a definite determiner. First, being the only Slavic languages with the definite determiner, they are an ideal testbed for the hypothesis, since they can help us control for the influence of genetic relatedness. The fact that these two languages allow for the majority reading of their superlative determiners clearly shows that genetic relatedness plays no role in the hypothesized correlation.

Second, both languages have *two* superlative determiners, one having the majority, and the other the plurality reading, as shown in (4) for Macedonian. This shows that although language-specific parametrization is necessary, it cannot explain everything. In the spirit of the Minimalist Program, the relevant parameter must be somehow tied to the lexical items in question. Precise formalisation is left for further research.

- (4) a. Povekjeto od lugjeto pijat pivo. (Macedonian)
 most-def from people-def drink beer
 Most people drink beer.
- b. Najmnogo od lugjeto vo Slovenija se belci. (Macedonian)
 most from people-def in Slovenia are white-people
 The plurality of people in Slovenia is white.
- c. *Najmnogu od lugjeto pijat kafe. (Macedonian)
 most from people-def drink coffee
 Most people drink coffee. (* in this reading)

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