

ATTRIBUTIVE SUPERLATIVES IN ROMANIAN¹

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Abstract

In this paper I present and discuss some novel observations on attributive superlatives in Romanian. Specifically, I analyze the acceptability contrast between pre- and post-nominal quantity superlatives, that is superlatives formed with quantity words such as ‘much’, ‘many’, ‘little’ and ‘few’. I propose to derive their behavior from two assumptions: (i) post-nominal superlatives are reduced relatives (cf. Alexiadou 2001) and (ii) quantity superlatives at LF involve extraction of the degree operator out of the determiner phrase containing it (Heim 1985, 1999; Szabolcsi 1986). Post-nominal quantity superlatives are then predicted to be ungrammatical because they are inside islands for -est movement. Some consequences of this analysis are also explored.

1. Introduction

Attributive superlatives such as *highest* in (1) are found in a variety of languages (Germanic, Romance, Slavic, Ugric) and have received considerable attention recently (Szabolcsi 1986, Heim 1985, 1999, Farkas and Kiss 2000, Sharvit and Stateva 2002, among many others).

- (1) John climbed the [highest] mountain.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by focusing on a specific type of attributive superlatives, namely quantity superlatives like those in (2), and discusses their behavior in Romanian.

- (2) (a) Dan saw the [most] countries.
(b) Czechs drink the [most] beer per capita in the world.
(c) Cingular has the [fewest] dropped calls.
(d) The pretzels have the [least] fat.

Unlike ordinary superlatives (1), quantity superlatives are formed with quantity words such as ‘much’, ‘many’, ‘little’ or ‘few’. It has been noted that this morphological distinction correlates with a semantic distinction; in contrast to ordinary superlatives, quantity ones allow only the so-called comparative reading (Szabolcsi 1986, Gawron 1995, Farkas and Kiss 2000). In

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this paper I present novel data from Romanian showing that the two types of superlatives may differ in yet another way; specifically, their word order properties. In this language ordinary superlatives can occur on both sides of the noun, while quantity superlatives are grammatical only in pre-nominal position. This contrast is derived from the syntax-semantics interface, and it is argued to be the result of the grammar of superlatives in conjunction with a restriction on the post-nominal position.

More generally, this paper bears on the discussion of whether the –est operator should be interpreted outside the determiner phrase containing it on the surface or not. There is broad consensus that on one of their readings, known as the absolute reading, superlatives are interpreted with the degree operator taking scope locally within its determiner phrase. However, the way in which the other interpretation of superlatives arises, namely the comparative reading, is still very much an open issue. Is this reading derived by allowing the degree operator to take scope out of its host determiner phrase or is it due strictly to some contextual restriction? The behavior of attributive superlatives in Romanian suggests that both accounts are needed for the same language.

The paper is organized as follows: section (2) introduces the word order constraints that attributive superlatives are subject to in Romanian. Section (3) attempts to derive them from the properties of quantity adjectives and the special status of the post-nominal position. It turns out however, that quantity adjectives are not responsible for the restricted distribution of quantity superlatives. Section (4) shows that the ungrammaticality of quantity superlatives in post-nominal position is in fact due to the grammar of superlatives in conjunction with their being inside islands for –est movement. The interpretation of ordinary superlatives in post-nominal position is discussed in section (5). Section (6) concludes and presents some further considerations.

2. Word order and attributive superlatives in Romanian

Romanian superlatives are rather curious, since unlike plain adjectives, they can freely occur before or after the noun. The examples in (3) show that plain adjectives can either precede or follow the noun, but that only the post-nominal position is the unmarked one². If the adjective occurs before the noun, as in (3a), it is perceived as literary and conveys some special attitude on the part of the speaker – for example, that s/he considers the story very long and maybe tiresome. Example (3b), where the adjective follows the noun, is natural and does not carry any additional evaluative meaning.

- (3) (a) *Anca ne-a spus o lungă poveste.*
 Anca 1p.Dat-Aux.Past.3s told a long.f.s story.f.s
 (b) *Anca ne-a spus o poveste lungă.*
 Anca 1p.Dat-Aux.Past.3s told a story.f.s long.f.s
 ‘Anca told us a long story.’

² This is true for most adjectives. There is, however, a small group of exceptions, which is documented in Cornilescu (2005); some of these adjectives can occur only before the noun, others only after the noun, and yet others can occur on both sides, but have different meanings.

In contrast to plain adjectives, superlatives are unmarked in both pre-nominal and post-nominal position, that is, there are no restrictions or special effects associated with either of these positions. To illustrate, both the superlative in (4a) and the one in (4b) are interpreted in the same way and neither of them is perceived as literary or as carrying some evaluative meaning.

- (4) (a) *Anca ne-a spus [cea mai lungă] poveste.*
 Anca 1p.Dat-Aux.Past.3s told EST.f.s ER long.f.s story.f.s
 “Anca told us the longest story.”
- (b) *Anca ne-a spus poveste-a [cea mai lungă].*
 Anca 1p.Dat-Aux.Past.3s told story.f.s-the.f.s EST.f.s ER long.f.s
 “Anca told us the longest story.”

Interestingly, not all superlatives behave the same way in Romanian. While ordinary superlatives can freely appear on either side of the noun, quantity superlatives are confined to the pre-nominal position. Their restricted distribution is illustrated in (5) and (6). The examples in (5), where the superlatives containing *mult* “much/many” and *puțin*, “little/few” precede the noun, are perfectly grammatical. However, once the very same superlatives are placed after the noun, as in (6), the respective constructions become degraded. The pattern holds independently of whether the superlatives modify mass nouns, as in (5a,b) and (6a,b), or count nouns, as in (5c,d) and (6c,d)³.

- (5) (a) *Dan a băut [cea mai multă] bere.*
 Dan Aux.Past.3s drunk EST.f.s ER much.f.s beer.f.s
 “Dan drank the most beer.”
- (b) *Masina mea a consumat [cea mai puțină] benzină.*
 car-the my Aux.Past.3s consumed EST.f.s ER much.f.s fuel.f.s
 “My car used the least amount of fuel.”
- (c) *Ionuț a intervievat [cele mai multe] fete.*
 Ionuț Aux.Past.3s interviewed EST.f.p ER many.f.p girl.f.p
 “Ionuț interviewed the most girls.”
- (d) *Florin a citit [cele mai puține] romane.*
 Florin Aux.Past.3s read EST.f.p ER few.f.p novels.f.p
 “Florin read the fewest novels.”

³ Note also that for both ordinary and quantity superlatives, there is a correlation between the presence/absence of the definite article on the noun and the position of the superlative: the definite article can only be present when the superlative is post-nominal. This correlation is not related to the word order asymmetry between ordinary and quantity superlatives and will therefore be left aside here. For further details I refer the reader to Cornilescu (2006).

- (6) (a) * *Dan a băut bere-a [cea mai multă].*
 Dan Aux.Past.3s drunk beer.f.s-the.f.s EST.f.s ER much.f.s
 “Dan drank the most beer.”
- (b) * *Masina mea a consumat benzin-a [cea mai puțină].*
 car-the my Aux.Past.3s consumed fuel.f.s-the.f.s EST.f.s ER much.f.s
 “My car used the least amount of fuel.”
- (c) * *Ionuț a intervievat fete-le [cele mai multe].*
 Ionuț Aux.Past.3s interviewed girl.f.p-the.f.p EST.f.p ER many.f.p
 “Ionuț interviewed the most girls.”
- (d) * *Florin a citit romane-le [cele mai puține].*
 Florin Aux.Past.3s read novels.f.p-the.f.p EST.f.p ER few.f.p
 “Florin read the fewest novels.”

The main question to be addressed in this paper is why are examples like (6) ungrammatical? In other words, why are quantity superlatives prohibited from the post-nominal position, while ordinary superlatives, as well as plain adjectives, are perfectly fine in the same context (Table 1)?

Table 1

	Pre-nominal position	Post-nominal position
ordinary adjectives	✓	✓
ordinary superlatives	✓	✓
quantity superlatives	✓	*

To answer this, I suggest that we need to look more closely at the properties of the post-nominal position on the one hand, and the properties of quantity adjectives and quantity superlatives, on the other hand. The next section will show that in Romanian all adjectives coming after the noun are reduced relatives and will explore a possible analysis for the puzzle in table 1 according to which the restriction on quantity superlatives is due to the inability of quantity adjectives to be used predicatively.

3. Quantity adjectives in post-nominal position

3.1 A restriction on the post-nominal position

According to Alexiadou (2001) the adjective placement facts observed across languages are not the result of noun raising. Instead, they are best accounted for under an analysis which assigns different structural base positions to adjectives. Using data from Greek and Romance languages she argues that the post-nominal position is dedicated to relative clauses. Under this view, post-nominal adjectives, at least in the languages under discussion, are *always* reduced relatives, that is, they all have a predicative source. The decisive evidence comes from a series of adjectives whose interpretation varies depending on whether they occur before or after the noun. Whenever these adjectives follow the noun, there is only one possible reading and this is the intersective reading. The non-intersective reading is excluded in this position. This is illustrated in (7) and (8) with examples from Spanish and French.

- (7) (a) *el chico pobre* (Post-nominal position: poor = impoverished/*pitiable)
the boy poor
(b) *el pobre chico* (Pre-nominal position: poor = pitiable/*impoverished)
the poor boy
- (8) (a) *la française pauvre* (Post-nominal position: poor = impoverished/*pitiable)
the French woman poor
(b) *la pauvre française* (Pre-nominal position: poor = pitiable/*impoverished)
the poor French woman

If the adjective ‘poor’ is placed in post-nominal position as in (7a) and (8a) it can only mean ‘impoverished’, which is the intersective interpretation. If ‘poor’ is placed before the noun, as in (7b) and (8b), it has a non-intersective reading meaning ‘pitiable’.

Zooming in on Romanian now, we know that it is a Romance language, but can the above proposal be extended to it as well? The examples below involving the adjectives *sărac*, ‘poor’ and *adevarât*, ‘true’, show that this is indeed the case. Both of these adjectives have different meanings depending on whether they precede or follow the noun. Crucially, if they are placed in post-nominal position only one interpretation is possible. This interpretation is different from the one in pre-nominal position, but identical to the one in predicative position.

Examples (9) show that the interpretation of *sărac*, ‘poor’ parallels the interpretation of its counterparts in French and Spanish. When *sărac* follows the noun it is unambiguously interpreted as ‘impoverished’; the interpretation ‘pitiable’ not being possible here. Importantly, when it occurs in a post-copula environment, as in (9c), *sărac* again can only mean ‘impoverished’.

- (9) (a) *băiat-ul sărac* (Post-nominal position: poor = impoverished/*pitiable)
boy.m.s-the.m.s poor.m.s
“the poor boy”
(b) *sărac-ul băiat* (Pre-nominal position: poor = pitiable/*impoverished)
poor.m.s-the.m.s boy.m.s
“the poor boy”
(c) *Acest băiat este sărac.* (Post-copula position: poor = impoverished/*pitiable)
this.m.s boy.m.s is poor.m.s
“This boy is poor.”

Similarly, the adjective *adevărat* can only mean ‘true’ when it occurs in post-nominal or post-copula environments. The interpretation ‘quite a’, which is possible in pre-nominal position, is excluded from these contexts.

- (10) (a) *o poveste adevărată* (Post-nominal position: true story/*quite a story)
a story.f.s true.f.s
“a true story” (Cornilescu 1992: 203)
(b) *o adevărată poveste* (Pre-nominal position: quite a story/*true story)
a true.f.s story.f.s
“a true story” (Cornilescu 1992: 203)
(c) *Această poveste este adevărată.* (Post-copula position: true story/*quite a story)
this.f.s story.f.s is true.f.s
“This story is true.”

If we assume that Romanian is just like the other Romance languages in that post-nominal adjectives are always reduced relatives we can immediately derive the interpretation pattern above. By constraining post-nominal adjectives to always be represented syntactically as small clauses we ensure that the range of readings available in predicative environments is the same as those in post-nominal position.

To sum up, we've seen that there is something distinctive about the post-nominal position. The next step is to determine the reason why quantity superlatives are disallowed from occurring here. Could it be because quantity adjectives themselves cannot occur in predicative position?

3.2 *Are quantity adjectives restricted in their distribution?*

It has been argued that in languages like English quantity adjectives are in fact never used predicatively, in spite of examples like (11)(a) (Hackl 2001). Example (11)(a) shows that both the ordinary adjective *rude* and the quantity adjective *many* are grammatical in the post-copula position, but Hackl suggests that this environment doesn't actually provide the best test for establishing that quantity adjectives are interpreted as genuine predicates. Instead, other test environments should be used, such as the complement position of the predicates like *look*, which don't license Null Complement Anaphora, or the predicate position of small clauses. The examples in (11)(b) show that regular adjectives like *sophisticated* or *rude* are fine in these contexts, but the quantity adjective *many* isn't. English *many* cannot occur as the complement of *look* (11)(b) or as the predicate of a small clause (11)(c).

- (11) (a) *The guests were rude/many.*
 (b) *The guests look sophisticated/*many.*
 (c) *Mary considers the guests rude/*many.*
 (adapted from Hackl 2001)

If Romanian quantity adjectives were to behave the same way as their English counterparts, we could analyze the puzzle presented in Table 1 in the following way:

- (12) Romanian quantity superlatives cannot follow the noun because quantity adjectives themselves are banned from this position due to their inability to be used predicatively.

However, this hypothesis doesn't get us very far because unlike English, Romanian quantity adjectives can be used predicatively. Not only are quantity adjectives allowed in post-copula position (13a), but they can also occur as complement of *look* (14a) or as predicates of small clauses (15a), just like regular adjectives.

- (13) (a) *Spectatorii ăștia sunt entuziasmați.*
 Audience.m.p-the.m.p these.m are full of enthusiasm
 "This audience is full of enthusiasm."
 (b) *Spectatorii ăștia sunt puțini.*
 audience.m.p-the.m.p these.m are few.m.p
 "There are few people in the audience."

- (14) (a) *Anul trecut invitații de la revelion păreau fericiți.*
 year-the last guests.m.p-the.m.p from New Year's Eve party looked.3p happy.m.p
 "The guests at the New Year's Eve party last year looked happy."
 (b) *Anul trecut invitații de la revelion păreau puțini.*
 year-the last guests.m.p-the.m.p from wedding looked.3p few.m.p
 "The guests at the New Year's Eve party last year looked few."
- (15) (a) *Deși îi consideră neastâmpărați, bunicii își iubesc nepoții.*
 Although them consider.Pres.3 mischevious, grandparents-the their love.Pres.3 grandchildren-the
 "Although they consider them mischevious, grandparents love their grandchildren."
 (b) *Deși îi consideră puțini, angajații așteaptă banii cu nerăbdare.*
 Although them consider.Pres.3 few.m.p, employee-the wait.Pres.3 money-the with impatience
 "Although they consider it little, the employees wait for the money with impatience."

Moreover, quantity adjectives are also fine in post-nominal position, and this is shown in (16).

- (16) *A băut (puțină) bere (puțină).*
 PAST.3s drunk little.f.s beer.f.s little.f.s
 "S/he drank little beer."

The picture that we arrive at now is summarized in Table 2 below. It has been shown that an analysis like the one proposed in (12) doesn't work for Romanian. Specifically, we can keep the proposal that post-nominal adjectives are reduced relatives, but we need to discard the assumption that quantity adjectives are special. Instead, I suggest looking more closely at the properties of quantity superlatives.

Table 2

	Pre-nominal position	Post-nominal position (reduced) relatives only
ordinary adjectives	✓	✓
ordinary superlatives	✓	✓
quantity adjectives	✓	✓
quantity superlatives	✓	*

4. Quantity superlatives are exceptional

This section explores whether the word order effects seen with quantity superlatives can be derived from the grammar of the superlative in conjunction with the restriction on the post-nominal position. I mentioned in the introduction that the morphological distinction between ordinary and quantity superlatives correlates with a semantic distinction. Does this semantic contrast have anything to do with the unacceptability of quantity superlatives in post-nominal position? As I will show below, this is indeed the case. I start by discussing the interpretation of ordinary superlatives and show how it has been accounted for in the literature, and then I proceed to quantity superlatives.

4.1 Ordinary superlatives

Ordinary attributive superlatives are often ambiguous between an absolute and a comparative reading (Szabolcsi 1986, Heim 1999). Take for instance the English and the Romanian examples in (17); they are both ambiguous between the interpretations given in (18).

- (17) (a) Anca climbed the [highest] mountain.
 (b) *Anca a urcat [cel mai înalt] munte.*
 Anca PAST.3s climbed EST.m.s ER tall.m.s mountain.m.s
 “Anca climbed the highest mountain.”
- (18) (a) *Absolute reading:*
 Anca climbed a mountain which is higher than any other mountain.
 (b) *Comparative reading:*
 Anca climbed a higher mountain than anyone else.

On the absolute reading, our examples are understood to claim that Anca climbed the highest mountain of all mountains. To be true under this interpretation, they need to describe a situation where Anca climbed Mount Everest, for example, which we know to be the highest mountain of all the mountains on Earth. In contrast, on the comparative reading the sentences in (17) convey something weaker, namely that Anca climbed a higher mountain than other individuals did. On this interpretation, our sentences can truthfully describe a situation where Anca climbed Mont Royal, which is basically a hill, as long as no one else climbed anything higher.

Heim (1985, 1999) and Szabolcsi (1986) account for the availability of these two readings in terms of a scope ambiguity. Specifically, they assign superlative constructions like (17) two possible logical forms, one in which the *-est* operator is interpreted locally, inside its host determiner phrase (19)(a), and one where *-est* scopes out of the determiner phrase and is interpreted externally (19)(b). The first logical form captures the absolute reading (18)(a), and the second one captures the comparative reading (18)(b).

- (19) Movement analysis
 (a) LF_1 : Anca climbed [the $-est_C$ 1 [$[t_1$ high] mountain]].
 (compares mountains; superlative NP refers to a particular mountain)
 (b) LF_2 : Anca [$-est_C$ 1 climbed [A [$[t_1$ high] mountain]]].
 (compares mountain climbers; superlative NP does not refer)

This predicts that in one case we compare mountains, while in the other we compare people. Here’s how it works: the superlative morpheme is analyzed as denoting a function, which when fed with the denotation of a gradable adjective ($\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$)⁴ and an individual (in this order)

⁴ Under this approach, gradable adjectives have an at least semantics, namely they relate a degree d to an individual x iff x has the property expressed by the adjective to at least degree d . The denotation of an adjective like *high* is then:
 $[[high]](d)(x) = 1$ iff x is at least d high

returns a truth value. Note that the individual argument is always understood as being part of the domain restriction (C) of the -est operator.

$$(20) \quad [[\text{est}_C]](R)(x) = 1 \text{ iff } \exists d [R(d)(x) \forall y [y \text{ belongs } C - \{x\} \rightarrow R(d)(y) = 0]]$$

On the absolute reading the degree operator stays inside the determiner phrase containing it on the surface and the desired interpretation is obtained by applying –est to the $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ function *high mountain* (cf. the logical form in (19a)). The meaning of the whole sentence then comes out as: Anca climbed the unique x such that there is a degree d , x is a d -high mountain and for any other y in the domain different from x , y is not a d -high mountain. Consequently, on this reading we compare mountains and the superlative noun phrase is referential, namely its semantic value in a given context is the object it denotes in that context.

In contrast, the comparative reading is derived by moving the –est operator out of its host determiner phrase and adjoining it to an intransitive verb phrase $\langle e, t \rangle$ (cf. the logical form in (19)(b)). This movement operation leaves behind a trace of type d and introduces lambda abstraction at the landing site, as shown in (21):

$$(21) \quad \text{Anca } [-\text{est}_C [\lambda d \text{ climbed } [A [[d\text{-high}] \text{ mountain}]]]].$$

The requirements of –est are thus satisfied: its first argument is the $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ function $[\lambda d \text{ climbed } [A [[d\text{-high}] \text{ mountain}]]$ and its second argument is the individual corresponding to the subject determiner phrase, *Anca*. The sentence means: there is a degree d such that Anca climbed a d -high mountain and for any other y in the domain different from Anca, y did not climb a d -high mountain. On the comparative reading then, we compare mountain climbers rather than mountains, and the superlative noun phrase is not referential.

Note that when the –est operator extracts from the determiner phrase, the determiner *the* is interpreted just like indefinite *a*. This correctly captures Szabolcsi (1986)’s observation that superlatives behave like definites only on the absolute reading; on the comparative reading they are similar to non-specific indefinites, as suggested by the contrast below.

- (22) (a) *John has the sister.
 (b) John has a sister.
 (c) Mary has the prettiest sister. (comparative reading only)

This operation also has the welcome result that –est is no longer inside an island. If the determiner phrase containing the superlative were to be interpreted as definite, like on the absolute reading, the extraction of –est would have been illegitimate. Definite determiner phrases are strong islands and the covert movement of operators is required to obey the same constraints as overt movement. However, with the determiner being interpreted as an indefinite, –est is no longer inside an island, since indefinites do allow extraction.

This section has shown that ordinary superlatives are ambiguous between two readings, and that the difference between them is the content of the comparison set. Under the movement analysis presented above, the absolute reading is obtained by interpreting –est locally, within its host determiner phrase, while the comparative reading is derived by interpreting it externally. This ensures that we compare mountains in the first case, but people/mountain climbers, in the other case. Now that we know how ordinary superlatives are interpreted and analyzed let us look at quantity superlatives and examine the differences between the two.

4.2 Quantity superlatives

Unlike ordinary superlatives, quantity ones are never ambiguous (Szabolcsi 1986, Gawron 1995, Farkas and Kiss 2000). Quantity superlatives like (23) only allow the comparative reading, which is understood as saying that Brown's campaign has been joined by more volunteers than any other campaign.

- (23) Brown's campaign has been joined by the [most] volunteers. (Gawron 1995:347)

The absolute reading is absent because superlative noun phrases formed with quantity items lack a referential interpretation. In other words, they are never able to pick out a referent in terms of its cardinality or amount. To illustrate, let us compare examples (23) and (24).

- (24) Brown's campaign has been joined by the [largest] group of volunteers. (Gawron 1995:347)

Both *the most volunteers* and *the largest group of volunteers* have a comparative reading on which we compare campaigns with respect to how many volunteers joined them, but the ordinary superlative in (24) also allows a reading that the quantity superlative in (23) doesn't. This is the absolute reading according to which *the largest group of volunteers* can directly refer. Suppose that there are 20 groups of volunteers that joined campaigns and that among them the British Trust for Conservation is the group with the largest number of volunteers. On the absolute reading, *the largest group of volunteers* picks out the British Trust for Conservation and the sentence in (24) means: Brown's campaign was joined by the British Trust for Conservation. Given the same scenario, the sentence in (23) can never mean this, which shows that the determiner phrase *the most volunteers*, cannot pick out a referent by its cardinality.

Additional evidence that determiner phrases like *the most students* are not referential comes from weak cross-over examples (Bernhard Schwarz, personal communication). It has been observed that unlike quantifier phrases, definite determiner phrases in object position can co-refer with pronouns contained in the subject determiner phrase. For instance, in (25)(a) the pronoun *their* and the determiner phrase *the players* can be interpreted as co-referring. In contrast, example (25)(b), where the pronoun is bound by the quantifier phrase is ungrammatical. This difference has been traditionally attributed to the fact that unlike referential descriptions like definite determiner phrases and proper names, quantifier phrases undergo quantifier raising and thus cross over a co-indexed pronoun, which creates the so-called weak crossover effect.

- (25) (a) Their_i parents talked to [the players]_i.
(b) #Their_i parents talked to [every player]_i.

Since ordinary superlatives on their absolute reading behave similarly to definite determiner phrases, they are expected to be able to co-refer with the pronoun inside the subject determiner phrase. This prediction is borne out, as shown by (26)(a). If quantity superlatives were to have an absolute reading, they would also be able to co-refer with the pronoun in example (26)(b). However, this is not possible, thus providing further evidence that quantity comparatives allow only the comparative reading.

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| (26) | (a) Their _i parents talked to [the tallest players] _i . | (ordinary superlative, absolute reading) |
| | (b) #Their _i parents talked to [the most players] _i . | (quantity superlative, no absolute reading) |

The exceptional behavior of quantity superlatives can be captured under the movement analysis described in the previous section by postulating that whenever the –est operator is merged with a quantity item as its sister, it must scope out of the determiner phrase containing it on the surface, as shown in (27b). Not allowing for –est to be interpreted locally guarantees that the absolute reading is always absent.

- (27) (a) *Absolute reading*: absent (there is no referential interpretation)
 –est must always scope outside its host determiner phrase
 (b) *Comparative reading*:
 Brown’s campaign [-est_C 1 [has been joined by [[A] [[t₁ many] volunteers]]]].

I claim that such an account extends to Romanian as well, since Romanian quantity superlatives too, are interpreted as allowing only the comparative reading. Examples like (28a-d) below cannot have an absolute/referential interpretation. The only reading that they can have is given in (29a), (29b), (29c) and (29d) respectively.

- (28) (a) *Dan a băut [cea mai multă] bere.*
 Dan Aux.Past.3s drunk EST.f.s ER much.f.s beer.f.s
 “Dan drank the most beer.”
 (b) *Masina mea a consumat [cea mai puțină] benzină.*
 car-the my Aux.Past.3s consumed EST.f.s ER much.f.s fuel.f.s
 “My car used the least amount of fuel.”
 (c) *Ionuț a intervievat [cele mai multe] fete.*
 Ionuț Aux.Past.3s interviewed EST.f.p ER many.f.p girl.f.p
 “Ionuț interviewed the most girls.”
 (d) *Florin a citit [cele mai puține] romane.*
 Florin Aux.Past.3s read EST.f.p ER few.f.p novels.f.p
 “Florin read the fewest novels.”
- (29) (a) Dan drank more beer than anyone else.
 (b) My car consumed less fuel than any other car.
 (c) Ionuț interviewed more girls than anyone else.
 (d) Florin read fewer novels than anyone else.

The fact that in this language quantity superlatives are illicit in post-nominal position (30) then follows straightforwardly. We’ve seen earlier that in Romanian all adjectives following the noun are reduced relatives. Consequently, quantity superlatives in post-nominal position are always inside relative clauses and as such the requirement of the –est operator to scope out cannot be satisfied as it would violate the relative island constraint.

- (30) (a) * *Dan a băut bere-a [cea mai multă].*
 Dan Aux.Past.3s drunk beer.f.s-the.f.s EST.f.s ER much.f.s
 “Dan drank the most beer.”
- (b) * *Masina mea a consumat benzin-a [cea mai puțină].*
 car-the my Aux.Past.3s consumed fuel.f.s-the.f.s EST.f.s ER much.f.s
 “My car used the least amount of fuel.”
- (c) * *Ionuț a intervievat fete-le [cele mai multe].*
 Ionuț Aux.Past.3s interviewed girl.f.p-the.f.p EST.f.p ER many.f.p
 “Ionuț interviewed the most girls.”
- (d) * *Florin a citit romane-le [cele mai puține].*
 Florin Aux.Past.3s read novels.f.p-the.f.p EST.f.p ER few.f.p
 “Florin read the fewest novels.”

As it stands right now, our proposal predicts that in Romanian no superlative following the noun can have a comparative reading. The natural question that arises at this point is what happens when we extend this analysis to post-nominal ordinary superlatives? They too, are inside islands for movement, so we expect them to never allow the degree operator to be interpreted externally. Consequently, they should always have an absolute reading. But is this true? The next section will describe the interpretation of ordinary superlatives in post-nominal position and discuss the implications of the data.

5. Superlatives and context-dependency

5.1 Ordinary superlatives

Contrary to expectations, Romanian ordinary superlatives in post-nominal position are actually ambiguous between an absolute and a comparative reading, just like their pre-nominal counterparts. The example in (31) can mean either that Anca climbed a mountain which is higher than any other mountain, or that Anca climbed a higher mountain than anyone else (32).

- (31) *Anca a urcat munte-le [cel mai înalt].*
 Anca past.3s climbed mountain.m.s-the.m.s est.m.s er tall.m.s
 “Anca climbed the highest mountain.”

- (32) (a) *Absolute reading:*
 Anca climbed a mountain which is higher than any other mountain.
- (b) *Comparative reading:*
 Anca climbed a higher mountain than anyone else.

At first sight this may seem problematic for the analysis proposed. I argue however, that there is no inconsistency, since comparative readings can arise in two different ways: by interpreting the *-est* operator non-locally as shown above under the movement analysis or by contextually restricting the comparison class (Heim 1999). I claim that in ordinary superlatives following the noun the comparison reading is interpreted in the second manner.

Like all natural language quantifiers, the *-est* operator has an implicit restriction on its domain. To illustrate, the example in (31) on its absolute reading does not necessarily mean that

‘Anca climbed the highest mountain in the world’; it can very well mean something much less stronger, namely that ‘Anca climbed the highest mountain in Romania.’ Similarly, on the comparative reading, the example in (31) does not necessarily compare Anca to all the other people in the world that have climbed mountains. Instead, it compares her to some contextually-relevant set of people. To spell out this context-dependency of –est, the two readings in (32) can be paraphrased as shown in (33):

- (33) (a) *Absolute reading*:
Of all the salient mountains, Anca climbed the highest mountain.
(b) *Comparative reading*:
Of all the locally salient people who climbed mountains, Anca climbed the highest mountain.

I suggest that in post-nominal ordinary superlatives, the comparative reading is derived by restricting the domain of –est, rather than moving it out of its host determiner phrase and interpreting it externally. Under this context-dependency analysis, the absolute and the comparative readings share the same logical form, namely the one in (34a), but they differ from each other in that the utterance context provides a different comparison set: (34)(b) versus (34)(c). This explains why comparative readings are possible even when the respective superlatives are inside islands.

- (34) Context-dependency analysis
(a) LF_1 : Anca climbed [the -est_C 1 [[t₁ high] mountain]]. (compares mountains)
(b) *Absolute reading*:
C = set of all relevant mountains
(c) *Comparative reading*:
C = set of all mountains climbed by relevant people

Suggestive evidence supporting the context-dependency analysis of ordinary superlatives in post-nominal position comes from so-called possessive superlatives. In some languages, if the superlative noun phrase is preceded by a genitive, the comparative reading is blocked (Schwarz 2005). Compare the examples in (35)(a) and (36) from English. The superlative in (35)(a) is ambiguous between an absolute and a comparative reading, while (36), where a pre-nominal genitive is present, can only be understood as saying that he read the paper of mine that is longer than all the other papers of mine. Unlike the definite article, the genitive seems to block the covert movement of –est.

- (35) (a) John summarized the longest paper.
(b) *Absolute reading*
John summarized the paper that is longest among some salient set of papers.
(c) *Comparative reading*
John summarized a longer paper than anyone else in some salient set of people.
(36) John summarized my longest paper.
(from Schwarz 2005: 200)

If the context-dependency analysis is correct, Romanian possessive superlatives are predicted to be ambiguous. This is indeed the case as shown by the examples in (37), which allow both an absolute and a comparative reading.

- (37) (a) *Anca a citit roman-ul meu [cel mai voluminos].*
 Anca Aux-Past.3s read novel.m.s-the.m.s my.m.s EST.m.s ER long.m.s
 (b) *Anca a citit [cel mai voluminos] roman al meu.*
 Anca Aux-Past.3s read EST.m.s ER long.m.s novel.m.s Poss.m.s my.m.s
 “Anca read my longest novel.”

To illustrate, let us work through the following scenario. Suppose that I owned a large collection of books and that Anca along with other friends of mine would often borrow my novels. Suppose moreover that my longest novel is *Ulysses*, my second longest novel is *Moby Dick*, my third longest novel is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and so on. On the absolute reading, the sentences in (37) are true only if Anca read *Ulysses*. On the comparative reading however, the sentences in (37) can be true even if Anca read *Moby Dick* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as long as everyone else read a shorter novel than she did. Both readings are possible in Romanian. In fact, if we overtly constrain the domain of –est by adding the prepositional phrase *dintre toți prietenii mei*, ‘among all my friends’ at the beginning of our sentences, the comparative reading becomes the only interpretation available.

To sum up, the context-dependency of –est accounts for why ordinary superlatives in post-nominal position allow comparative readings even though they are inside islands.

6. Conclusion and further considerations

This paper has presented a novel set of data bearing on the discussion of whether degree operators are scopally mobile or not (Kennedy 1997, Heim 1999, 2000, Farkas and Kiss 2000, Sharvit and Stateva 2002, Schwarzschild and Wilkinson 2002, Schwarz 2006, among others). Specifically, the behavior of attributive superlatives in Romanian suggests that in this language we need both a movement and a context-dependency account in order to derive the interpretation of post-nominal superlatives (Table 3).

Table 3

	Post-nominal position: (reduced) relatives only	Interpretation	Analysis
quantity superlatives	*	comparative reading	movement
ordinary superlatives	✓	absolute and comparative readings	context- dependency

Quantity superlatives can only have a comparative reading, and this reading is necessarily derived by interpreting the degree operator with clausal scope. Unlike ordinary superlatives, quantity ones can never be interpreted with –est inside its host determiner phrase since this would make them referential and would generate an unattested meaning. Since in Romanian the post-nominal position is dedicated to relative clauses, the requirement of –est to scope out cannot be

satisfied, which explains why quantity superlatives in this language are ungrammatical in such contexts.

In contrast, the interpretation of ordinary superlatives does not require movement, which correctly captures the fact that there are no restrictions on their occurrence in post-nominal position. Post-nominal ordinary superlatives are ambiguous between absolute and comparative readings, and in both cases the degree operator is interpreted locally. The difference between the two meanings is derived by varying the contextual restrictions of –est.

Further evidence that both the movement and the context-dependency analyses are needed in Romanian comes from the interpretation of superlatives in intensional contexts. These are cases like (38) where the superlative occurs in the complement clause of an intensional verb, *want*.

- (38) Anca wants to climb the [highest] mountain.

Besides the ordinary de-re and de-dicto readings, such superlatives also have a special interpretation, namely the split-de-dicto reading (Heim 1999). This reading seems to compare wishes rather than mountains or mountain climbers/mountains climbed and becomes available in a scenario like the following. Suppose that someone conducts a survey asking the question: “How high a mountain do you want to climb?” and Anca answers that she wants to climb a 4000m high mountain, Dan answers that he wants to climb a 3000m high mountain and so on, as shown in Table 4 below.

- (39) How high a mountain do you want to climb?

Table 4

	1000m	2000m	3000m	4000m
Anca				•
Dan			•	
Florin		•		
Sica	•			

Suppose moreover that no one wants to climb a particular mountain, which eliminates the absolute and comparative de-re readings from the range of possible interpretations. If no one cares about the height of the mountain to be climbed relative to other mountains, the absolute de-dicto reading is also ruled out. Finally, suppose that no one cares how high a mountain anyone else will climb. This excludes the possibility of having a comparative de-dicto reading. The interpretation that we are left with then is the split-de-dicto reading, which according to the movement analysis compares wishes.

Heim 1999 proposes that the split-de-dicto reading is captured by a logical form where –est scopes above the intensional operator, while the remainder of the superlative determiner phrase scopes below it. This is shown in (40).

- (40) Movement analysis
 John [-est_C 1 [wants [PRO to climb [[A] [[t₁ high] mountain]]]]] .

If we extend this analysis to Romanian, we expect superlatives in post-nominal position not to allow this reading, since they are inside islands for –est movement. However, this is not the

case. Post-nominal superlatives in intensional contexts do allow the split de-dicto reading. The examples in (41) can be interpreted as comparing the minimal lengths that would satisfy the wishes of the different authors.

- (41) (a) *Diana vrea să scrie [tez]-a cea mai lungă.*
 Diana wants Subj write.Subj.3 dissertation.f.s-the.f.s EST.f.s ER long.f.s
 (b) *Diana vrea să scrie cea mai lungă [teză].*
 Diana wants Subj write.Subj.3 EST.f.s ER long.f.s dissertation.f.s
 “Diana wants to write the longest dissertation.”

The behavior of Romanian superlatives thus provides support for Sharvit and Stateva (2002)’s proposal that the split de-dicto reading can be derived without movement and that it actually arises through context-dependency.

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