Aller is not an intensifier but part of a Domain Defining Superlative Compound

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In this paper we claim that Dutch and German *aller* (*allerbeste*, 'very best') is not an intensifying prefix or an excessive as it is sometimes claimed to be (e.g. Kiefer 1998: 277, Van der Wouden 2015) but rather the universal quantifier that can form a compound with superlatives, defining the relevant domain in which the superlative should be interpreted ('the best of all'), yielding what we would like to call a Domain Defining Superlative Compound (DDSC). More specifically, we argue that *aller* is an argument of the superlative, and that it is an overt expression of Heim's (1999) "domain argument" or the "comparison class C" (see (1) below).

Support for this new analysis comes from the hitherto unreported existence of other DDSCs: DDSCs are not restricted to the universal quantifier but can be constructed with other nominal elements attaching to superlatives, exhibiting the same interpretation. These can be found both in Dutch and German albeit with different degrees of productivity:

(1) *John climbed [the [[C -est] [high mountain]]]*

(2) *Johann besteigt den welt-höchsten Berg.*   [German]
'John climbs the world-highest mountain.'

(3) *Carmen van de Rijt won de race en klopte de seriesnelste Kim Busch.*   [Dutch]
'Carmen van de Rijt won the race and beat the series-fastest Kim Busch.'

These compounds pattern with the *aller-* compounds in all respects, e.g. (i) they do not have comparative or positive variants (6-9) and (ii) they can only be formed with morphological superlatives, not with semantically superlative elements (10-13), which sets them apart from intensifiers (e.g. *ijzersterk, hammerhart*):

(6) **Der weltgute Berg*   [German]
'the world-good mountain'

(7) **Der weltbessere Berg*
'the world-better mountain'

(8) **de groepsoude*   [Dutch]
'the group-old'

(9) **de groepsoudere*
'the group-elder'

(10) **weltoptimal, *weltperfekt*   [German]
'world-optimal, world-perfect'

(11) **alleroptimal, *allerperfekt*
'optimal of all, perfect of all'

(12) **groepsoptimale, *groepsfavoriete, *groepsultieme*   [Dutch]
'group-optimal one, group-favorite one, group-ultimate one'

(13) *alleroptimale, *allerfavoriete, *allerultieme

'optimal one of all, favorite one of all, ultimate one of all'

In order to empirically substantiate our claim and to further specify the syntactic and semantic properties of DDSCs, we conducted a corpus study via Sketch Engine (Kilgariff et al. 2004, 2014). With the help of a python script, we were able to automatically extract a list of DDSCs in both languages (nlTenTen20 and deTenTen20) for 500 superlatives.

References

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