

The syntax of ordinal superlatives

Ruby Sleeman

(Goethe University Frankfurt and Institute for Mediterranean Studies - Foundation for Research & Technology Hellas (IMS-FORTH)

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This study makes a contribution both to the understudied field of ordinal numerals as well as to the field of Dutch formal syntax, by proposing a new syntactic analysis of the hitherto largely overlooked construction *de op CARDINAL na SUPERLATIVE NOUN*, and comparing it to a formal syntactic analysis of ordinal numerals.

Ordinal numerals are not very widely studied in the formal syntactic literature (some examples: Barbiers 2007, Cinque 2023, Den Dikken 2022, Meyer 2019). They have received some attention in formal semantic literature, but not much there either (e.g. Alstott 2023, Bhatt 2006, Sharvit 2010, Bylinina et al. 2014). A related phenomenon that is even less studied are ordinal superlatives:

1. Mike climbed the **second-highest** mountain.

Alstott (2023) paraphrases the meaning of the ordinal superlative as follows:

2. “The n-th highest mountain is the mountain that, with the exception of n-1 others, is the highest” (p. 1)

Ordinal superlatives are considered standard only in Flemish Dutch, a variety spoken in Belgium.

Dutch has a competing alternative construction which, unlike the ordinal superlative, is considered standard: *op x na*. Dutch hereby makes the paraphrase in (2) explicit, as the *op x na* construction is used elsewhere in the language as a phrasal exceptive.

3. Mike heeft de tweede hoogste berg beklimmen.
M. AUX the second highest mountain climbed
4. Mike heeft de (op) een na hoogste berg beklimmen.
M. AUX the (at) one nigh highest mountain climbed

I show that *op x na* behaves differently from other Dutch circumpositions, and propose an alternative analysis in which *na* is the adverb *nigh* modifying the superlative adjective, with *op CARDINAL* as a measure phrase to *na*.

Alstott (2023) shows that semantically, ordinal superlatives pattern with bare ordinals, and proposes that every bare ordinal must take a covert superlative adjective as one of its arguments. I adopt this analysis and extend it to the syntax, where I use it to formalize the multiple possible readings of the ordinal superlative: whenever the ordinal is adjacent to the overt superlative, it may be interpreted in relation to it; but whether or not they are adjacent, the ordinal superlative meaning is lost when the ordinal merges its own covert superlative. Finally, I show that while (3) and (4) can mean the same thing, their structures differ: *op x na* is an adjunct to the superlative while ordinal and superlative are both merged as modifiers of the noun.

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