

The syntax of ordinal superlatives

Ruby Sleeman

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

Keywords: ordinal numerals, superlatives, Dutch, nominal modification, generative syntax

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 beklommen.
M. AUX the second highest mountain climbed
4. Mike heeft de (op) een na hoogste berg beklommen.
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.

This work was carried out in the Research Training Group GRK 2016 "Nominal Modification", funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), project number 244436322.

References

Alstott, Johanna V. (2023), Ordinal numbers: Not superlatives, but modifiers of superlatives, *Semantics and Linguistic Theory* 33, 1-20.

- Barbiers, Sjef (2007), Indefinite numerals one and many and the cause of ordinal suppletion, *Lingua*, 117(5), 859-880.
- Bhatt, Rajesh (2006), *Covert modality in non-finite contexts*, De Gruyter Mouton.
- Broekhuis, Hans (2013). *Syntax of Dutch. Adjectives and Adjective Phrases*, Comprehensive Grammar Resources, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Bylinina, Lisa, Natalia Ivlieva, Alexander Podobryaev and Yasutada Sudo (2014), A non-superlative semantics for ordinals and the syntax of comparison classes, Ms., Meertens Instituut, Institut Jean Nicod, Higher School of Economics, and UCL.
- Dikken, M. den (2022). Ordinals, reflexives and unaccusatives. Unification by predication, in T. Halm, E. Coppock, and B. Surányi (eds), (2022), *Approaches to Hungarian 17: Special issue of the Journal on Uralic Linguistics* 1:2, 215–238.
- Meyer, Caitlin. M. (2019), *Rule and order: Acquiring ordinals in Dutch and English*, Utrecht: LOT.
- Sharvit, Yael (2010), Infinitival superlatives: English vs. Modern Hebrew, *Brill's Journal of Afroasiatic Languages and Linguistics* 2(1), 213–247.
- Sijs, Nicoline van der (2010), Na, *Etymologiebank*. Retrieved January 23, 2024, from <http://etymologiebank.nl/>.