

Linguistics Seminar Series on

“Natural Language Quantification – Compositionality in Quantifier Phrases and Quantifier Words”

Lecture 3: Comparatives and Superlatives Decomposed

Professor Anna Szabolcsi
New York University

Date: October 18, 2012 (Thursday)

Time: 4:30pm – 6:15pm

Venue: LSK LT2 (Lee Shau Kee Building), Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

As a rule of thumb, formal semantic analyses often take words to be minimal building blocks for the purposes of compositionality; but there have been interesting precedents for setting word boundaries aside. The poster child for this approach has been the amount superlative *most*. It has been argued (Heim 1985, Szabolcsi 1986) that *most* is not a compositional primitive; it contains a proper superlative morpheme that takes DP-internal scope on the so-called absolute reading and sentential scope on the so-called relative, or comparative, reading.

I argue that further benefits can be reaped by pursuing the same approach even more vigorously.

Based on cross-linguistic evidence from suppletive morphology, Bobaljik (2012) hypothesizes that the representation of the superlative properly contains that of the comparative. I show that building the semantics in two steps, i.e. as $[[[d\text{-many}] \text{comparative}] \text{superlative}]$, sheds new light on why there are two robustly different intuitions about the semantics of so-called relative superlatives in the literature. The debate concerns what comparison is made in sentences like *Who climbed the most/fewest mountains?* On one analysis (Heim 2000, Hackl 2009), climbers are compared with respect to achievements. On another analysis (Farkas & Kiss 2000, Sharvit & Stateva 2002, Krasikova 2011), numbers of mountains are compared. I argue that there are two distinct comparative constructions out of which superlatives are built, and the two analyses correlate with this duality. The results are truth-conditionally equivalent, but they are not equivalent morpho-syntactically, and they are not equal in offering an insight into why a superficially definite noun phrase notoriously patterns with indefinites. Furthermore, if the hypothesis of Interface Transparency is correct, they predict different processing strategies.

ALL ARE WELCOME

This seminar series is supported by the Postgraduate Students Conference/Seminar Grant of the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong.

Organizer:



LAL CUHK
語言獲得實驗室

Language Acquisition Laboratory
Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages
Chinese University of Hong Kong

香港中文大學語言學及現代語言系語言獲得實驗室