RELATIVE READINGS OF SUPERLATIVES: SCOPE OR FOCUS?

1 Proposal
In English: -est doesn’t scope out of DP.
In Polish: -est scopes out of DP, but only when allowed by Scope Economy.

2 Absolute and Relative readings of Superlatives
(1) John bought Mary the most expensive cake.

Absolute reading:
(i) ‘John bought Mary the cake that was more expensive than any other cake.
Relative readings - set with respect to one of the sentence constituents:
(ii) ‘John bought Mary a more expensive cake than anyone else bought her.
(iii) ‘John bought Mary a more expensive cake than he bought for anyone else.

3 Disambiguating effects of focus on relative reading
(2) a. [John\textsubscript{focus}] bought Mary the most expensive cake. \(\rightarrow\) (1i), (1ii), but not (1iii)
b. [John] bought [Mary\textsubscript{focus}] the most expensive cake. \(\rightarrow\) (1i), (1iii), but not (1ii)

(2) alone suggests that we need reference to focus in the derivation of relative reading, however, (3) suggests otherwise.

4 Evidence that focus is not needed (Szabolcsi 1986, Heim 1999)
(3) We should congratulate the boy who got the most expensive [cake\textsubscript{est}]

Lack of correspondence between prosodic focus and putative semantic focus on who or its trace.

5 Puzzle: Focus in the superlative relative clause in Polish
Why is focus obligatory on the adverbial (d)?

(4) Pojawię się najdroższy chłopu, który dostali [najdroższego\textsubscript{est}] ciastko.
We should congratulate boy who got the most-expensive\textsubscript{est} cake

We should congratulate the boy who got a more expensive cake than any other boy.

(5) Pojawię się najdroższy chłopu, który dojdzie ciastko.
‘We should congratulate the boy who got a more expensive cake than any other boy.

(6) Pojawię się najdroższy chłopu, który dostali [najdroższego\textsubscript{est}] ciastko.
We should congratulate the boy who got a more expensive cake than any other boy he got.

(6) – (6-Internal Relative Reading)

6 Analysis
Focus in (4) indicates that -est has DP-internal scope. Accordingly, DP-internal scope in Polish is obligatory for relative readings set with respect to DP-external constituents. \(\xrightarrow{7}\)

DP-external scope for -est is constrained by Scope Economy \(\xrightarrow{7,9}\)

With DP-internal\textsubscript{-est}, C can be set purely by context, (8), or by association with focus, (9)

\(-est\) is more constrained at LF than previously argued, yet the range of relative readings available cross-linguistically is still found (Tomaszewicz 2015).

7 Focus on superlative adjectives ensures DP-internal scope for -est
Without the focus on adjectival in (4), on neutral intonation, (5), the sentence receives the DP-Internal Relative Reading \(\rightarrow\) Est scopes DP-externally.

(7) [a. [est C]\textsubscript{focus}] [\textsubscript{est C}][b. [est C]\textsubscript{focus}][c. [est C]]

 Implicit context: Which boy got which cake?
Which boy got which cake?
Which boy got which cake?

We should congratulate the boy who got the [most\textsubscript{est}], most-expensive cake.

\(\xrightarrow{7}\) When the superlative adjective is focused, C is determined by (DP-)internal scope and context.

8 Focus on Superlative Adjective has Indirect Effect on C
The focus on \([\text{est C}]\) is available if there is a theme antecedent in the context (\([\text{DP-}\text{focus}\text{C}]\), Roeth 1992:89).

(8) a. [\text{est C}\textsubscript{focus}] [\text{est C}][b. [\text{est C}\textsubscript{focus}][c. [\text{est C}]]

 Implicit context: Which boy got which cake?
Which boy got which cake?
Which boy got which cake?

We should congratulate the boy who got the [most\textsubscript{est}], most-expensive cake.

\(\xrightarrow{8}\) When the superlative adjective is focused, C is determined by (DP-)internal scope and context.

9 Scope Economy
Scope Economy: QR operations that do not result in a truth-conditional difference are excluded by principles of economy (Fox 2000, Reinhart 2006).

(9) 1st Movement Step in the derivation of DP-Internal Relative reading:
\(\xrightarrow{9}\) cake\textsubscript{est} \([\text{est C}\textsubscript{focus}] \text{got} \{\text{est C}\textsubscript{focus}\} 1\text{-est cake}\)
\(\xrightarrow{9}\) C\textsubscript{focus} \([\text{est C}\textsubscript{focus}] \text{got} \{\text{est C}\textsubscript{focus}\} 1\text{-est cake}\)

The QR of cake in (9a) is not semantically vacuous. The denotation of NP2 is assignment dependent, hence, by presuppositions C\textsubscript{focus} is a set of individuals \(x\) such that there is a degree to which \(x\) is expensive and there is a predicate true of \(x\).

\(\xrightarrow{9}\) DP-External Relative readings are derived with DP-internal -est both with definite and indefinite marked DPs, i.e. both in English and Polish.

References: