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POSTNOMINAL MANY_{superl} IN ROMANIAN AND THE THEORY OF MOST

Abstract: We investigate the readings available for quantity superlatives (more specifically the superlative of MANY) in postnominal positions in Romanian. Besides an absolute reading based on predefined groups, noticed in previous studies, we point out the existence of a relative (‘comparative’) reading. The proportional reading is absent. The analysis of the data provides evidence against Hackl’s (2009) hypothesis that proportional MOST is an absolute reading of MANY_{superl}. Our proposal is further confirmed by the effect of Direct Object Marking on the interpretation of MANY_{superl}.

Keywords: superlatives, quantitatives, relative vs absolute, proportional, Romanian

1. Overview

Romanian allows MANY_{superl} (*cei/cele mai mulți/multe* ‘SUP.MP/FP more many.MP/FP’ = ‘most’) to appear not only in the prenominal position (default) but also in the postnominal position:

- (1) a. *Cele mai multe lebede sunt albe.*
SUP.FP more many.FP swans(F) are white
‘Most swans are white.’
b. *Lebedele cele mai multe sunt negre.*
swans(F)-the SUP.FP more many.FP are black
‘The largest group of swans are black.’

The postnominal placement in (1b) can also be observed for the other quantity superlatives, namely MUCH_{superl} and FEW/LITTLE_{superl}:

- (2) a. *Lebedele cele mai puține sunt negre.*
swans(F)-the SUP.FP more few.FP are black
‘The smallest group of swans are black.’

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- b. pentru a vedea la ce adâncime e apa cea mai multă
 for to see at what depth is water(F)-the SUP.FS more much.FS
 ‘to see at which depth there is the most water’ (<https://republica.ro/generatia-b-civic-alert-sau-cum-poti-astupa-gropile-din-cartierul-tau-cu-telefonul-mobil>)

The postnominal $MANY_{superl}$ (deemed impossible by Teodorescu 2009) was described by Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2015) as presupposing the existence of a set of contextually predefined groups of various cardinalities (e.g. two or three groups of swans swimming together in different parts of a lake).

Nicolae and Scontras (2022) suggest that this special meaning is due to the fact that postnominal $MANY_{superl}$ in Romanian instantiates Double Definiteness (DD): *cei/cele*, which immediately precedes the comparative marker *mai* ‘more’, would be the strong form of the definite article, which is indeed found in Romanian with postnominal modifiers co-occurring with a definite article suffixed to the head N:

- (3) Ion a examinat-o pe fata (cea) înaltă.
 Ion has examined-CL.3F.SG.ACC DOM girl-the (the.FS) tall
 ‘Ion examined the tall girl.’

This proposal is problematic: the definite article is obligatory with postnominal $MANY_{superl}$ (as well as with any other superlative) but optional (as indicated by the brackets in (3)) with all postnominal modifiers other than superlatives. Moreover, there is strong independent evidence in favor of *cel* functioning as a superlative marker (§2).

DD may at best be viewed as the origin of the grammaticalization process that led to the emergence of a special superlative marker. Note moreover that Nicolae and Scontras’s explanation of the necessity of a predefined set of groups as being due to the ‘familiarity’ triggered by the demonstrative-like nature of the *cel* of DDs is invalidated by the fact that the postnominal $MANY_{superl}$ allows for relative readings (see (2b) above and §3.1 below). As we will see, the predefined-groups reading only arises for what we will identify as the ‘absolute’ reading of postnominal $MANY_{superl}$ (see §4.1).

Given these facts, we will conclude (§4) that the interpretive effect of the postnominal position on $MANY_{superl}$ is not due to double definiteness but rather to the postnominal position itself, which (i) makes available (albeit rather marginally) the absolute reading of $MANY_{superl}$ and (ii) blocks the proportional reading. Interestingly, the relative reading is possible, under the same conditions as for prenominal $MANY_{superl}$. In §4 we propose an analysis of these generalizations, the main theoretical conclusion being that the proportional reading of $MANY_{superl}$ cannot be analyzed as an absolute reading (*contra* Hackl 2009). The DOM data (§5) provide further support for these claims.

2. Definite marking in prenominal and postnominal superlatives

Superlatives in Romanian are formed by comparatives preceded by the element *cel*, which is homonymous with the strong form of the definite article (see e.g. *cei doi copii* ‘the.MP

two children’) and shows agreement when the superlative is adjectival (see (1)-(2)). It has been shown that, in spite of these similarities, *cel* in superlatives never sits in D^0 , not even when it is DP-initial, as in (4)a (Giurgea 2013, Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2021). This is shown by the pair in (4a) vs (4b): in the latter configuration, interpreted as involving an adjective in the comparative degree, the definite article surfaces as a suffix on the adjective. This canonical placement of definite articles preceding adjectives is ruled out in (4b), which forces us to assume that *cel* does not sit in D^0 but instead is part of the superlative phrase.

- (4) a. [cel mai important] proiect
 SUP more important project
 ‘the most important project’
 b. [(mult) mai importantul] proiect
 much more important-the project
 ‘the (much) more important project’

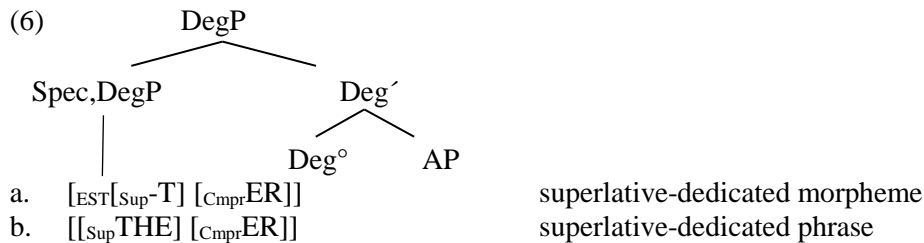
The fact that *cel* is not in D^0 is also clear for superlatives co-occurring with an overt determiner (see (5a)) as well as for adverbial and predicative superlatives (see (5b-c)). In (5c), the superlative is predicative (rather than part of an elliptical DP) in the reading when the comparison is between moments of time, rather than persons: ‘which time *t* is such that at *t* you were happier than at any other time *t*?’):

- (5) a. un/acest [cel mai mare] număr
 a /this SUP more large number
 ‘a/this largest number’
 b. El vorbește cel mai repede
 he speaks SUP more fast
 ‘He speaks the fastest.’
 c. Când ai fost cel mai fericit?
 when have.2SG been SUP more happy
 ‘When have you been happiest?’

In examples of this type *cel* (which is obligatory, just like in postnominal superlatives) cannot be analyzed as being due to (double) definiteness.

Analyses of French and Romanian superlatives (Giurgea 2013, Loccioni 2018, Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2021, Dobrovie-Sorin 2021, 2023) agree that in both of these languages the element immediately preceding the comparative form is a ‘superlative marker’ ($[_{\text{sup}}\text{THE}]$ henceforth, to be glossed as SUP) rather than a genuine definite article. Theoreticians may disagree as to whether $[_{\text{sup}}\text{THE}]$ preserves – at least partially – the semantics of the definite article, say maximality (Loccioni 2018) or not.¹ But they agree on $[_{\text{sup}}\text{THE}]$ being part of a superlative-dedicated DegP or Spec,DegP constituent (Loccioni 2018 and Dobrovie-Sorin 2021, respectively). For concreteness we assume the latter option:

¹ The label $[_{\text{sup}}\text{THE}]$, borrowed from Dobrovie-Sorin (2023), is a notation that is meant to signal an analysis according to which the superlative marker THE of French and Romanian occupies the same position as the $[_{\text{sup}}\text{T}]$ of English that together with [ER] forms [EST]. For arguments that synthetic superlatives such as those of English are also based on comparatives, see Bobaljik (2012).



For our present purposes we are not interested in the internal structure of superlatives, but we do need to make it clear that the postnominal position occupied by $MANY_{sup}$ in Romanian is not related to double definiteness (*contra* Nicolae and Scontras 2022) but instead (i) (what looks like) the definite article is part of the superlative constituent itself and (ii) the postnominal position is an unmarked option for adnominal superlatives across all Romance languages.

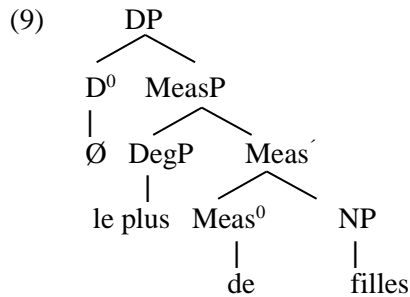
Note however that Romanian is unique among Romance languages in that the postnominal position is accessible not only to quality superlatives, but also to quantity superlatives. Particularly telling is French, which disallows postnominal quantity superlatives, despite the fact that it resembles Romanian in having the internal structure shown in (6b) for postnominal quality adjectives (in addition to adverbs and predicate positions):

- (7) a. la fille [_{Deg}la plus pauvre]
 the girl SUP more poor
 b. *les cygnes les plus
 the swans SUP more

Le plus ‘the more’ can occur in a prenominal position, arguably the same position as that occupied by the positive form *beaucoup* ‘much, many’, the comparative *plus* ‘more’ and measure phrases, e.g., *300 g*:

- (8) a. le plus de filles
 SUP more of girls
 b. beaucoup de filles
 much of girls
 c. plus de filles
 more of girls
 d. 300 grammes de sucre
 300 grams of sugar

Because the pseudo-partitive configuration is common to all of these examples, it seems particularly natural to assume (following Dobrovie-Sorin 2021) that *le plus* sits in the position dedicated to Measure Phrases (and more generally Quantitatives), which has been labelled Spec,Mon(tonicity) by Schwarzschild (2006) and relabelled Spec,Meas by Solt (2009):



Although in many languages MANY/MUCH differ from Measure Phrases in not requiring a pseudo-partitive morphosyntax, their semantic properties are similar to those of Measure Phrases, and as such they have been analyzed as sitting in Spec,Meas (Solt 2009).

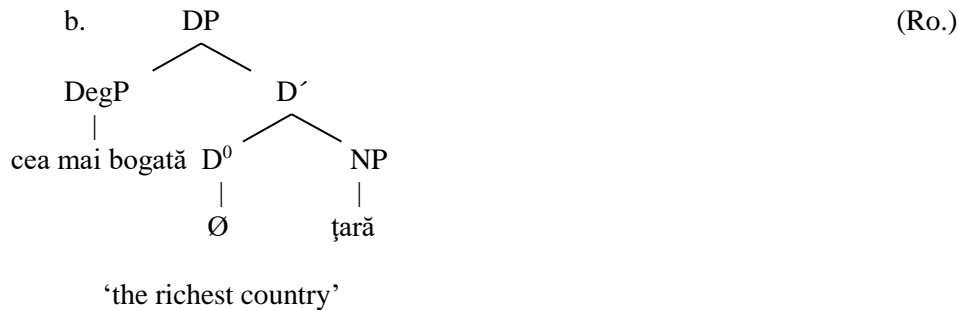
Turning now to MANY/MUCH^{superl}, we will concentrate on French (see above) and Romanian, where THE is part of the superlative constituent in postnominal quality superlatives, adverbial and predicative superlatives (see the discussion of examples (7a) and (5) above):

- (10) a. [DP [D la] [[NP fille] [DegP la plus pauvre]]] (Fr.)
 the girl SUP more poor
 b. [DP [D+def] [[NP fata] [DegP cea mai săracă]]] (Ro.)
 girl-the SUP more poor
 ‘the poorest girl’

Given the DegP-internal position of THE with postnominal quality superlatives we may conjecture that the same structure underlies quantity superlatives. The problem is that quantity superlatives normally occur prenominally (if we leave aside the Romanian pattern under investigation here), where the structure of quality superlatives is different in French vs. Romanian:

- (11) a. In French (as well as in the other Romance languages) prenominal quality superlatives are made up of [Spec,DegP MORE] embedded in a DP headed by [D° THE].
 b. In Romanian prenominal quality superlatives [DegP [Spec,DegP THE MORE] [Deg° Deg° Adj]] sit in the Spec,DP of a null [D° ∅]
- (see Giurgea 2013, 2023)





Evidence in favor of the contrast described in (11a-b) comes from the relative position of superlatives with respect to cardinals:

- (13) a. les deux [plus riches] pays (Fr.)
 the two more rich countries
- b. [cele mai bogate] două țări / cele două [cele mai bogate] țări (Ro.)
 SUP more rich two countries the two SUP more rich countries
 ‘the two richest countries’

This type of evidence cannot be constructed for MANY/MUCH_{Sup}, which leaves open the choice between structures that are parallel to the structures of quality superlatives and structures that are specific to quantity superlatives (see (9) above), which are parallel to the positive and comparative forms of MANY/MUCH in that they sit in Spec,Meas. Evidence for the latter alternative (proposed in Dobrovie-Sorin 2021) comes from a cross-Romance comparison (see Giurgea 2022, 2023): as shown by Loccioni (2018), in Italian or Spanish, where THE is not a superlative marker (THE does not occur in the counterparts of examples (5) and (7a), i.e., adverbial and predicative superlatives), quantity superlatives cannot be preceded by THE and are subject to the same licensing conditions as adverbial and predicative superlatives (see (14a), where the superlative reading of the comparative is licensed by the fact that the ‘correlate’ is a relative operator). Compare (14b), which reminds us that prenominal quality superlatives do co-occur with the definite article (see (14b)):

- (14) a. Maria è quella che ha (*i) più soldi (It.)
 Maria is the-one that has (the) more money
 ‘Maria is the one that has the most/more money.’
- b. il [più ricco] paese
 the more rich country
 ‘the richest country’

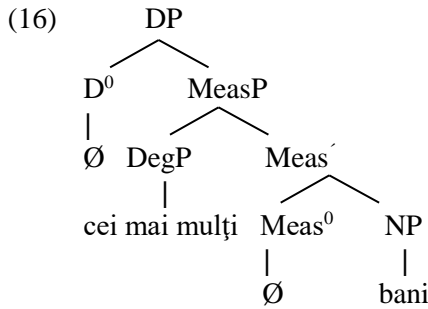
Granting that (14b) relies on a dedicated position of prenominal superlatives, SpecSupP (Giurgea 2022, 2023), (14a) shows that quantity superlatives do not have access to this position. This can be explained by the fact that (prenominal) scalar quantifiers (MANY/MUCH and FEW/LITTLE) are base-generated in a position above Sup in the

hierarchy of nominal functional projections: note indeed that cardinals precede SpecSupP, see (13a). If both cardinals and prenominal scalar quantitatives occur in SpecMeasP, the projection dedicated to quantity, it follows that the base position of quantity superlatives (Italian *più*, Spanish *más*) is above SpecSupP and therefore they cannot be licensed by being moved to SpecSupP. They are licensed either by containing an overt superlative marker (French *le*, Romanian *cel*) or by the special mechanisms discussed in Loccioni (2018), Giurgea (2022, 2023).

For Romanian, further evidence in favor of the placement of prenominal quantity superlatives in SpecMeasP (rather than in the Spec of a null definite D, as with quality superlatives) comes from clitic doubling triggered by DP-fronting. In Romanian, preverbal definite objects, including those containing quality superlatives, must be clitic-doubled, see (15a). But quantity superlatives cannot be clitic-doubled, see (15b):

- (15) a. Sumele cele mai mari *(le-)a câștigat Mihai.
 sums(F)-the SUP more large CL.3F.PL.ACC-has earned Mihai
 ‘It’s Mihai who earned the largest amounts.’
- b. Cei mai mulți bani (*îi) câștigă Mihai.
 SUP more many money CL.3M.PL.ACC earns Mihai
 ‘It’s Mihai who earns the most money.’

We conclude that (15b) has the indefinite structure in (9), with the superlative in SpecMeas and the null indefinite D that selects MeasP:



Placement in SpecDP can nevertheless be assumed for the proportionally interpreted DP-initial MANY^{superl} (see Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2021), which, on a par with other quantifiers that presuppose the non-emptiness of the set they quantify over, requires clitic doubling when fronted (# indicates that the clitic cannot be left out in the proportional interpretation):

- (17) Cele mai multe sticle #(le-)a cumpărat Mihai (proportional)
 SUP more many bottles CL.3F.PL.ACC-has bought Mihai
 ‘It’s Mihai who bought most (of the) bottles.’

As we will see in the next section, the different readings of the postnominal MANY/MUCH_{sup} vs. those of the prenominal one provide additional evidence that that the latter sits in Spec,MeasP.

3. The readings of postnominal and prenominal MANY_{superl}

3.1 Postnominal MANY_{superl} allows both absolute and relative readings

The postnominal position of MANY_{superl} shows that the postnominal placement of (superlative) adjectives, which is general across Romance languages, extends to quantity adjectives in Romanian. The example in (18) illustrates the possibility of coordinating Q-adjectives with quality adjectives, a pattern well attested on the Internet.

- (18) Au probleme multe și mari
 have.3PL problems many and big
 ‘They have problems that are many/numerous and big.’ (<https://traficmedia.ro/>)

Given that quality adjectives in postnominal positions can take both absolute and relative readings, we expect the relative reading to be possible. Although it had gone unnoticed in the previous literature, the relative reading is indeed possible for the postnominal MANY_{superl} (the pattern is well attested on the Internet; some attested examples are given in (19b-d):

- (19) a. I-am trimis **Mariei** studenții cei mai mulți.
 CL.3SG.DAT-have.1 sent Maria.DAT students-the SUP more many
 ‘I sent Mary more students that I sent to any other person’ (relative reading)
- b. familiile au depus cereri și au fost alese cele cu
 families-the have submitted requests and have been chosen the.FP with
 copiii cei mai mulți
 children-the SUP more many
 ‘The families submitted applications and those with the most children were chosen’ (<https://www.ziuconstanta.ro/stiri/deschidere-editie/traseul-donatiilor-catre-saracii-ce-se-vor-la-taraf-tv-ce-face-mazare-cu-banii-egipteanului-sawiris-galerie-foto-30791-340896.html>)
- c. Mergem acolo unde sunt banii cei mai mulți
 go.1P there where are money(P)-the SUP more many
 ‘We’re going where there’s the most money.’ (<https://www.capital.ro/mark-mobius-mergem-acolo-sunt-banii-cei-mai-multi-146605.html>)
- d. De acolo însă bondarii scot mierea cea mai multă
 from there but bumblebees-the get honey-the SUP more much
 ‘But that’s where bumblebees get the most money from.’ (<https://korap.racai.ro>)

(19a) says that the speaker has randomly sent students to various professors and then compares the cardinalities of the sums sent to various people and concludes that the one sent to Mary is the largest. There is no set of predefined groups, contrary to (1b).

Turning now to the absolute reading of MANY_{sup}, it has been previously argued to be semantically impossible (Szabolcsi 1986, Gawron 1995), and as such it should be ruled out not only in the prenominal but also in the postnominal position. In what follows we will see that this expectation is not fulfilled. Note indeed that the reading in 0b, which involves predefined groups, is in fact an absolute reading. This reading is marked, harder to get than the relative reading, because it requires predefined groups. But it is certainly not impossible.

3.2 Postnominal MANY_{superl} blocks the proportional reading

Whereas prenominal MANY_{superl} allows a proportional (majority) reading, this reading is ruled out with postnominal MANY_{superl} – *most children are lazy* can be rendered by (20a) but not by (20b):

- (20) a. Cei mai mulți copii sunt leneși.
 SUP more many children are lazy
 b. # Copiii cei mai mulți sunt leneși.
 children-the SUP more many are lazy

This minimal pair shows that *qua* superlative adjective (i.e., when forced to be interpreted as a cardinality predicate, as in 0b and 0b, MANY_{superl} blocks the proportional reading. We need to conclude, *contra* Hackl, that the proportional reading of MANY_{superl} *cannot* be obtained as a particular case of the semantics of absolute superlatives. Which means that the quantificational analysis of proportional MOST is the only possible one.

4. Revising the analysis of MANY_{superl}

4.1 The absolute reading of MANY_{superl}

The absolute reading of MANY_{superl} has been considered to be non-existent by all previous theoreticians (before Hackl 2009). The presumed semantic impossibility of the absolute reading of MANY_{superl} was explained as follows: if all pluralities of N are compared, the largest will be the maximal sum of N, i.e. *most* would mean *all* (Teodorescu 2007, a.o.). This explanation is proved inadequate by the Romanian postnominal MANY_{superl}, which allows an absolute reading that is (of course!) distinct from ‘all’: we do not compare all the pluralities in the join semi-lattice denoted by the NP but rather the groups of some *contextually-determined set*. As these groups are probably mutually exclusive, this set may be analyzed as a partition of the NP-set².

² Kotek et al. (2011) argue that Engl. *most* may have a relative superlative reading based on DP-internal scope of EST and a partition of the NP set as a comparison class, each sum in the partition being associated to an alternative of the main predicate (where alternatives are created by focus on the correlate). This type resembles

Let us now observe that in Romanian itself, the absolute reading of $MANY_{superl}$ is possible in the postnominal position, but ruled out in the prenominal position, where the only possible interpretation is proportional (in addition to the relative reading, for which a focused or a *wh*-constituent is needed):

- (21) Cele mai multe lebede erau negre
 SUP more many swans were black
 OK: ‘Most (of the) swans were black.’ (proportional)
 ??: ‘The largest group of swans were black.’ (absolute with predefined groups)

This impossibility is also observed in other languages: note indeed that for better studied languages such as English, French or German, where scalar quantitives are always prenominal, no absolute reading with predefined groups has been pointed out so far in the literature. The generalization regarding the impossibility of the absolute $MANY_{sup}$ can thus be maintained, but only for the prenominal position:

- (22) $MOST_{sup}$ allows the absolute reading in the postnominal, but not in the prenominal position.

This generalization clearly indicates that the (im)possibility of the absolute reading of $MANY_{sup}$ is a matter of syntax, not semantics. Our explanation will rely on the following ingredients:

- (23) a. $MANY_{superl}$ allows the absolute reading only if it occupies an adjectival syntactic position
 b. The prenominal position of $MANY_{superl}$ is *Spec,MeasP*, which is not an adjectival position.

We have seen that prenominal scalar quantitives sit in a dedicated position in a nominal functional projection, *SpecMeasP* (see §2). We may thus hypothesize that the absolute reading is ruled out in *SpecMeasP*. Why should this reading be ruled out, while the relative reading is possible (as we have seen in (15b))? Note first that in our view the relative vs absolute distinction relies on different LFs, with different scopes of the superlative operator, as proposed by Szabolcsi (1986) and Heim (1999). Our precise analysis (which departs from Heim’s implementation when it comes to quality relative superlatives) as well the motivation for adopting this view can be found in Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2023). Under this analysis, absolute readings are characterized by the superlative operator (EST) scoping below D. Interpreting EST in *SpecDP* or outside the DP, in a clause-adjoined position, yields relative readings. This means that what we have to rule out when $MANY_{superl}$ sits in *SpecMeasP* is EST scoping below D^3 . This scopal

our absolute $MOST_{superl}$ in that it relies on DP-internal EST but differs from it in that the sums that make off the partition are not predefined, but are established based on the main predicate (which is specific to relative readings).

³ We do not want to collapse Meas and D (see the tree in 0), because quantity expressions can co-occur with determiners, see e.g. *those few days, her many friends, the two boys*.

possibility of EST is indeed ruled out if we adopt Solt's (2009) analysis of MANY. Solt proposes a general analysis of scalar quantitatives as gradable predicates of degree sets (type $\langle d, \langle dt, t \rangle \rangle$), which covers not only their adnominal use, but also their use in differentials (e.g. *much more intelligent*). In her analysis, MANY raises outside the DP, and the degree operators (POS for the positive, ER and EST) further raise to a clause-adjoined position. It follows that EST cannot scope inside the DP, which rules out the absolute reading. Thus, by adopting Solt's denotations for scalar quantitatives in SpecMeasP we explain the impossibility of the absolute reading of MANY_{superl}.

But this implies that Solt's denotation does not apply to *postnominal* MANY, which *does* allow an absolute reading. We propose that postnominal MANY; which denotes a gradable property of entities (type $\langle d, et \rangle$), like other adjectives. More precisely, the constituent [Deg+MANY] (where the degree argument was saturated by a degree operator) denotes a cardinality predicate, which is a property of plural entities. This type of denotation is also found in postcopular position in examples such as (24) (note the possibility of coordination with a quality adjective, which excludes an analysis of *multe* as an elliptical DP):

- (24) Problemele sunt multe (și grele)
 problems-the are many and hard
 'The problems are numerous (and difficult).'

Because it functions as a cardinality predicate, MANY_{superl} in the postnominal position allows DP-internal scope of EST, which yields the absolute reading.

The fact that the absolute reading of MANY_{superl} has so far gone unnoticed is arguably due to the fact that this adjectival position of MANY is not found in well-studied languages such as English, German, French or Italian. As to Romanian, the few authors (Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2015 and Nicolae and Scontras 2022) who investigated the postnominal MANY_{superl} did not realize that the reading involving comparison between predefined groups is an instantiation of the absolute reading.⁴

Note finally that the absolute reading is difficult to obtain because the compared sums need to be defined by an independent criterion – not just by being *N (the set of pluralities denoted by the pluralized/starred N). Compare the relative reading, which is easily available because the main predicate together with the correlate provides a way of identifying the sums (e.g. in 0a each sum is associated to a different professor). The absolute reading depends on a context that must provide a specific set of predefined groups.

4.2 The relative reading of MANY_{sup}

Turning now to relative readings, no meaning difference can be detected between prenominal and postnominal MANY_{superl} – thus, the two versions in (25) are fully equivalent; the perfect similarity includes Heim's (1999) upstairs de dicto readings (where,

⁴ The Romanian postnominal MANY_{superl} was considered unacceptable by Teodorescu (2009).

in her analysis, the comparison is *de re* but the DP is *de dicto*) – as shown in (26), this reading may obtain in both positions:

- (25) familiile cu cei mai mulți copii / cu copiii cei mai mulți
families-the with SUP more many children / with children-the SUP more many
- (26) Ion vrea să urce munții cei mai mulți / cei mai mulți munți
Ion wants SBJV climbs mountains-the SUP more many SUP more many mountains
Possible readings: ‘There is an n such that Ion wants to climb n -many mountains (no matter which mountains) and for any n' such that somebody else wants to climb n' -mountains, n is greater than n' ’

The relative reading of postnominal $MANY_{\text{superl}}$ is achieved like for quality superlatives. In Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2023), we propose that relative superlatives embedded in definite DPs are not derived via EST raising out of the DP (as proposed by Heim 1999) but rather by raising of EST to SpecDP coupled with raising of the entire DP to a parasitic scope position just below the correlate (an analysis envisaged in passing by Szabolcsi 1986, but not formalized). Since postnominal $MANY$ behaves like a quality adjective, the same analysis should apply to postnominal $MANY_{\text{superl}}$. For prenominal $MANY_{\text{superl}}$, once we assume that $MANY$ raises out of the DP (see Solt’s proposal briefly summarized in the previous sub-section) EST will undergo further raising to its scope position below the correlate like in Heim’s (1999) analysis, following the derivation of DP-external superlatives (adverbial and predicative).

4.3 The proportional reading of $MANY_{\text{superl}}$

According to Hackl (2009), the proportional reading of $MANY_{\text{superl}}$ is an instantiation of the absolute reading, which, as briefly summarized above, had been previously assumed to be crosslinguistically unavailable.

The conceptual motivation behind Hackl’s (2009) proposal that the proportional reading of $MANY_{\text{superl}}$ is a species of absolute reading is the hypothesis that $MANY_{\text{superl}}$ is an adjective (cardinality predicate), which as such has the two readings crosslinguistically attested for superlative adjectives. Given that the absolute reading was assumed to be impossible, Hackl’s conjecture was that the proportional reading was the particular guise of the absolute reading of quantity superlatives. This reasoning is invalidated by the existence of genuine absolute readings of $MANY_{\text{superl}}$ in Romanian.

Turning now to the technical aspects of Hackl’s proposal, the semantic composition does not rely on the canonical definition of EST (which would have incorrectly generated a totality reading, see § 4.1 above) but instead is specifically designed to obtain the proportional reading: Hackl argued that if the semantics of superlatives is changed so that, for pluralities, instead of comparing x (the plural entity that will satisfy the superlative property) with all pluralities of N *distinct* from x , we compare x with all pluralities of N that do not *overlap* with x , the absolute reading of MOST amounts to the proportional

(majority) reading: note indeed that in order to satisfy this condition, x must be larger than the maximal sum of N that does not overlap with it, that is, larger than the sum containing all elements of N that are not in x (the ‘rest’ of the NP-domain). This obtains whenever x contains more than half of the elements of N . The existence of the absolute reading of the Romanian postnominal MANY_{superl} shows that the denotation of EST should not be manipulated in order to account for the proportional reading of MANY_{superl}.

The contrast between the (im)possibility of the proportional reading depending on the pre- vs postnominal positions constitutes evidence in favor of the traditional quantificational analysis of proportional MOST. Indeed, quantificational elements normally occupy DP-initial positions. This piece of evidence adds up to the various other arguments against equating the proportional reading of MANY_{superl} with the absolute one presented in Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea (2021).

5. Differential object marking (DOM)

In Romanian DOM is generally viewed as triggering a specific/referential reading (see Farkas 1978, Dobrovie-Sorin 1994, Cornilescu 2000, Tigău 2011, Avram 2014, Ticio and Avram 2015). According to a more precise description, DOM triggers partitive specificity (inclusion in a context-given set) and epistemic specificity and is blocked with nominals that must be interpreted as weak indefinites, such as bare nouns:

- (27) a. (I)-am lăsat pe câțiva angajați ai firmei să aștepte.
 CL.ACC-have.1 let DOM some employees GEN company-the.GEN SBJV wait.3
 ‘I let wait some (of the) employees of the company.’
- b. (*I)-am lăsat (*pe) angajați ai firmei să aștepte.
 CL.ACC-have.1 let DOM employees GEN company-the.GEN SBJV wait.3
 ‘I let wait employees of the company.’

Given these generalizations, our analysis of the various position-dependent readings of MANY_{superl} makes the following predictions: (i) because the relative reading of MANY_{superl} is weak (Szabolcsi’s 1986 evidence in favor of the indefiniteness of relative superlatives are in fact evidence in favor of weak-indefinite status), that reading should be blocked by DOM for both prenominal and postnominal MANY_{superl}; (ii) a DOM-ed prenominal MANY_{superl} should allow the proportional reading; (iii) a DOM-ed postnominal MANY_{superl} should allow the absolute reading. The data in (28) confirm these predictions: thus, (28a) seems to impose a proportional interpretation, and (28b) favors the absolute reading with predefined sub-groups:

- (28) a. Ion i-a examinat pe cei mai mulți studenți. ✓ prop. ?? relative
 Ion CL.ACC-has examined DOM SUP more many students
 ‘Ion examined most students.’

- b. Ion i-a examinat pe studenții cei mai mulți. ✓ absolute ??rel.
Ion CL.ACC-has examined DOM students-the SUP more many
'Ion examined the students of the largest group.'

The fact that proportional $MANY_{superl}$ allows DOM arguably follows from partitivity – proportional quantifiers, like universal distributive quantifiers (*each, every*), presuppose the existence of the set quantified over (see Heim and Kratzer 1998: 164-172). The fact that relative superlatives normally disallow DOM may be correlated to a weak indefinite status (Szabolcsi's 1986 evidence in favor of the indefiniteness of relative superlatives are in fact evidence in favor of weak-indefinite status).

6. Conclusions

The main theoretical results of the present investigation are: (i) the absolute reading of $MANY_{sup}$ exists and (ii) the absolute reading of $MANY_{sup}$ is due to coercing $MANY_{superl}$ (triggered by the postnominal position) into a cardinality predicate; (iii) proportional MOST is a quantificational element, and as such it must sit in a prenominal position. These general results were obtained by examining a language – Romanian – where MANY and its superlative have a twofold behavior, occurring either in a special prenominal position dedicated to quantity, SpecMeasP, or (more rarely) as postnominal adjectives, in the latter case being treated on a par with quality adjectives (with which they can be coordinated). We have seen that postnominal $MANY_{superl}$ may have a relative superlative reading and also an absolute reading based on predefined groups. The proportional reading, by contrast, is only possible in the prenominal position. This constitutes evidence against Hackl's (2009) equation of the proportional reading with the absolute superlative reading and in favor of a quantificational analysis of proportional $MANY_{superl}$.

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