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Some PP modifiers of NP block relative readings in superlatives¹

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Superlatives are ambiguous between an absolute and one or more relative readings (see: Heim 1985, 1999, Szabolcsi 1986, Gawron 1995, Farkas and Kiss 200, Sharvit and Stateva 2002, Pancheva and Tomaszewicz 2012).

(1) a. Art bought the largest sculpture for Andrew.

absolute: *Art bought a sculpture for Andrew that was larger than any other sculpture.*

b. ART bought the largest sculpture for Andrew.

relative 1: *The largest of the sculptures for Andrew that was bought by someone was bought by Art. Larger sculptures may exist.*

c. Art bought the largest sculpture for ANdrew.

relative 2: *The largest of the sculptures that was bought for someone by Art was bought for Andrew. Larger sculptures may exist.*

The two relative readings of (1) reflect the interaction of contrastive focus with the superlative: When a subject like *Art* (1b) or a VP-adjunct like *for Andrew* (1c) is focused, the superlative is relativized to the focus context.

The availability of relative readings depends on the locus of the focused item. Pancheva and Tomaszewicz (2012) notice that focusing an element internal to the superlative phrase does *not* make a relative reading available. So it is impossible to read *John met the youngest students from LONDON* as meaning #*The youngest of the students from somewhere that were met by John were from London*. The relative reading associated with subject focus (“relative 1”), however, is unaffected.

Surprisingly, certain PP modifiers of superlative DP block *all* relative interpretations, even those associated with subject focus (2):

(2) MARY bought the largest cake in the store.

relative 1 (unavailable): #*The largest cake in the store that was bought by anyone was bought by Mary. Larger cakes in the store may exist.*

It is not obvious why this should be. Most PP modifiers seem to allow the subject-focus relative reading, as in the examples in (3):

¹Published version available at: <http://www.ledonline.it/snippets/allegati/snippets29001.pdf>

(3) a. MARY bought the largest cake with sprinkles.

relative 1: *The largest cake with sprinkles that was brought by anyone was brought by Mary. Largest cakes with sprinkles may exist.*

b. BONNIE had the clearest shot at the target.

c. HANK travelled the longest road through the desert.

However, parallel to (2), the subject-focus relative reading is lost in the examples in (4):

(4) a. PAULA married the richest man around.

b. CLAUDIA bought the biggest house under \$150,000.

We hypothesize that the PP-modifiers in (2) and (4) themselves specify the domain under consideration for the evaluation of the superlative. PP modifiers which simply restrict the denotation of the N, on the other hand, leave the domain underspecified, and the speaker relies on context to determine the relevant domain for evaluation of the superlative (i.e. in (1) and (3)). In line with Pancheva and Tomaszewicz (2012), we believe the differences in domain specificity are likely due to a different attachment site for domain-restricting PPs within superlative DP. Such speculation is supported by phrasal compounds, which have unambiguous attachment to N and allow the relative reading:

(5) CLAUDIA bought the biggest under-\$150,000 house.

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