The Unavailability of Superlative Movement out of Korean Nominal Phrases

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Background  It is well known that certain ambiguities arise in nominal superlatives: the absolute reading (1a) and the relative reading (1b,1c). There are two main approaches to these superlative ambiguities. The Scope Theory (Heim 1985, 1999; Szabolcsi 1986) accounts for these different readings as a matter of different covert positions of -est. The DP-Internal Theory (Farkas & Kiss 2000; Sharvit & Stateva 2002) maintains that -est stays inside the DP and that the ambiguities arise from different pragmatic specifications of the comparison class.

Pancheva and Tomaszewicz (2012) observe an additional type of relative reading (2)—the DP-internal foc relative reading—which is available in (some) Slavic languages and not in English. They attribute the crosslinguistic difference to the existence of the definite article. Polish, naj- ‘-est’ can scope outside of the DP because there is no definite article, whereas English -est is interpreted DP-internally because the definite article blocks -est movement. They argue that DP-internal -est cannot associate with DP-internal focus, and therefore the DP-internal focus relative reading is unavailable in English.

A Puzzle  Korean does not allow the DP-internal focus relative reading for nominal superlatives: (3d). This is puzzling because Korean, like Polish, does not need a definite determiner in nominal superlatives.

Proposal  I argue that Korean kacang/ceyil ‘-est’ always stays DP-internal because Korean adjectival phrases are scope islands for -est. This claim is grounded in two assumptions: 1) Korean noun-modifying adjectives are predicates inside relative clauses (e.g. Kim 2002). 2) Finite clauses are scope islands for -est (Szabolcsi 1986). It follows, then, that the DP-internal Theory (Farkas & Kiss 2000; Sharvit & Stateva 2002) is needed to account for the relative readings in Korean. The relative readings in Korean are derived from a single LF (4) by setting the comparison class C differently with respect to different nominal constituents.

Further support for the DP-Internal Theory  The focus element can be inside an embedded finite clause in Korean superlatives: (5). This clearly shows that the relative readings in Korean cannot be due to scope differences, because -est QR is (finite) clause-bounded (Szabolcsi 1986).

Also, the availability of the relative reading in Korean superlatives is sensitive to the pragmatic status of the noun with respect to which the comparison class is set: (6). The relative reading comparing Chelswu with other individuals is available when Chelswu is marked with nominative case, but not when it is marked with a topic marker -nun (unless the topic-marked NP receives a contrastive reading). This suggests that topics are not compatible with F-marking, which introduces alternatives. In case of contrastive topic, however, an alternative set is available, thereby making it possible to F-mark Chelswu.

Differences between Korean and Japanese  Aihara (2009) and Shimoyama (2014) suggest that the Scope Theory of superlatives is necessary for Japanese. Japanese (7a), unlike Korean (7b), allows overt displacement of -est, in which case the relative reading is the only available interpretation (Aihara 2009). Based on (7a), Shimoyama (2014) argues that Japanese adjectives are not scope islands for degree quantifiers, and therefore are not relative clauses. Therefore, as expected, Japanese does not allow a relative reading of an NP contained in an embedded finite clause ((8) from Aihara 2009), in contrast to Korean. The differences between the two languages are summarized in (9).
(1) John bought the largest cake for Mary.
   a. Absolute reading: John bought Mary the cake that is larger than any other relevant cake.
   b. Relative reading: John bought a larger cake for Mary than anyone else did.
   c. Relative reading: John bought a larger cake for Mary than he did for anyone else.

(2) Jan kupił Marii naj-droższe ciastko. (Polish)
    Jan bought for-Mary est-expensive cake
    ‘John bought Mary a more expensive cake than anything else he bought her.’

(3) Chelswu-ka Yenghi-eykey [kacang/ceyil pissa-n kheik-ul] sacwusu-ess-ta
    Chelswu-NOM Yenghi-NOM EST expensive cake-ACC buy-PAST-DECL
    a. ‘Chelswu bought Yenghi the cake that was more expensive than any other (relevant) cake.’
    b. ‘Chelswu bought Yenghi a more expensive cake than any other (relevant) person did.’
    c. ‘Chelswu bought Yenghi a more expensive cake than for any other (relevant) person.’
    d. * ‘Chelswu bought Yenghi a more expensive cake than any other (relevant) thing he bought her.’

(5) Chelswu-ka [Yenghi-ka [kacang/ceyil noph-un cemswu]-lul
    Chelswu-NOM Yenghi-NOM EST high-REL score-ACC
    pat-ass-ta-ko] malhay-ss-ta
    get-PAST-DECL-that say-PAST-DECL
    a. Chelswu said that Yenghi got a higher score than anyone else got.
    b. The score that Chelswu said Yenghi got is higher than the score(s) that anyone else said she got. (i.e. Chelswu ranks highest in terms of how high a score one said Yenghi got.)

(6) Chelswu-ka/*nun kacang/ceyil pissa-n kheik-ul sa-ss-ta.
    Chelswu-NOM/TOP EST expensive-REL cake-ACC buy-PAST-DECL
    ‘Chelswu bought a more expensive cake than any other relevant person did.’ (relative)

(7) a. ichiban John-ga takai yama-ni nobot-ta (relative/*absolute)
    most John-NOM high mountain-to climb-PAST
    EST John-NOM high-adj mountain-to climb-PAST-DEC
    ‘John climbed the highest mountain’

(8) Mako-ga [Hanako-ga [mottomo/itiban taka-i tokuten]-o tot-ta to] it-ta.
    Mako-NOM Hanako-NOM most high-I score-ACC get-PAST that say-PAST
    ‘Mako said that Hanako got the highest score.’
    (Aihara 2009)
    a. Mako said that Hanako got a higher score than anyone else got.
    b. * The score that Mako said Hanako got is higher than the score that anyone else said she got. (i.e. Mako ranks highest in terms of how high a score one said Hanako got.)

(9) Summary of the differences between Korean and Japanese

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