# Modal superlatives as degree descriptions. Evidence from Romance.
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**In a nutshell**: In this paper, Romance data will play a crucial role in motivating a novel compositional analysis of modal predicative superlatives, that is, predicative superlatives accompanied by modal adjectives such as possible, as that in (1).

> (1) Mary wanted to be the prettiest possible.

I argue that they are elliptical *bona fide* degree-relative clauses denoting maximal degrees and with the same semantic contribution as Measure Phrases. This account will require a novel composition of the superlative which involves the formation of an ordered set and the selection of a maximal element. I show that not only is this account able to derive their peculiar semantics (dispensing us from the *ad hoc* components that previous accounts posited), but it can also capture the unique morphosyntax of these constructions, especially in Romance languages (which turn out more informative than English in this respect).

**The interpretation of modal superlatives** Semantically, modal superlatives are unique in that they have what Schwarz 2005 calls "equative force". That is, they can be paraphrased using an equative construction as shown in (2).

> (2) She wanted to be the prettiest possible.    ≈ She wanted to be as pretty as possible

Non-modal superlatives have instead stronger truth conditions that result in incompatibility with ties.

> (3) Yesterday, Mary was the kindest she has ever been
> ≈ Mary was kinder yesterday than she was at any other relevant time
> ≠ Yesterday Mary was as kind as she has ever been

**Previous accounts** In the literature, there are two main semantic accounts for modal superlatives: Schwarz 2005 and Romero 2013. Both analyses are able to derive the desired "equative" interpretation of modal superlatives, but they do so at the expense of having some *ad hoc* components in their analysis. In the case of Schwarz 2005, *-est possible* is taken to be a non-decomposable degree operator (see (4)), whose meaning is unrelated to the meaning of bare *-est*. This does not seem a desirable component of the analysis.

> (4) $[[\text{est possible}]]^w = \lambda P_{<s,dt>}. [\ \forall d\ [\exists w'[wRw' \ \& \ P(w')(d) = 1] \rightarrow P(w)(d) = 1\ ]$

Romero 2013 provides a compositional analysis where the more familiar Heimian meaning for *-est* in (5) is assumed. However, in order to derive the "equative force" of modal superlatives, she has to assume a particular type of quantification (over degree sets as opposed to degree properties) that could not be extended to other non-modal superlatives such as (3).

(5) $[[\text{-est}]] = \lambda Q_{<dt,t>}. \ \lambda P_{<d;t>}. \ \exists d\ [P(d) \ \& \ \forall Q \in \mathbf{Q} \ [Q \neq P \rightarrow not(Q(d))]$

The shape of modal superlatives in Romance Moreover both Schwarz 2005 and Romero 2013 inherit a well-known problem shared by any Heimian scopal theory of superlatives, which is that the definite determiner is not interpreted in the usual way. In their semantic compositions, it has merely existential force. This is particularly surprising in the case of modal superlatives in Spanish and Italian, which turn out to be the only case of predicative superlatives that allows the presence of an overt definite determiner.

(6) a.  Maria è stata il più carina che poteva (con i clienti)
Maria was the.nt more nice that she.could with the costumers
"Mary was the nicest she could be (with the costumers)'                    [ITA]
    b.  María quería estar los más guapa (que fuera) possible
Mary wanted to.be it.M.S. more pretty.F.S. that was possible
"Mary wanted to be the prettiest possible'                                 [SPA]

More generally, Romance languages show that in addition to having unique semantic properties, modal superlatives are unique morpho-syntactically. First, whereas the Italian (and Spanish) counterparts of (1) are fully acceptable, non-modal predicative superlatives such as (3) are ungrammatical (data omitted for space reasons). Second, Romance modal superlative predicates show a level of syntactic independence that their non-modal counterparts do not have. Unlike other predicative superlatives in Romance, they form a syntactic constituent that is headed by a definite determiner and that can appear as the sentential predicate (data omitted for space reasons). Also they are compatible with an indefinite determiner at the higher DP level. Third, modal superlatives look suspiciously similar to other (free) amount relatives in these languages. As an example compare Spanish (6b) with the free relative in (7), which is normally assumed to denote a single degree.

(7)     Susana es más guapa de [FreeRC lo que lo es María ]
Susana is more pretty of the that it is Mary
"Susana is prettier than Mary is"

**Proposed analysis** I argue that the syntactic and semantic properties discussed above are easily explained if we assume that the degree phrase in modal superlatives is an elliptical relative clause. Once ellipsis is resolved, the relative clause refers to a single maximal degree which plays the role of a Measure Phrase. That is, it provides a degree that saturates the degree slot of the adjective directly. This is shown in (9b) for (6b), whose LF is given in (8).

(8)     María [ 1 quería [ [ lo sup más 3 (que fuera) posible <para PRO$_1$ estar guapa t$_3$ >]
[ 2 PRO$_1$ estar guapa t$_2$ ] ]

(9) a.    [[ 2 PRO$_1$ estar guapa t$_2$ ]] = $\lambda$d. [ guapa(g(1),d) ]
    b.        [[ lo sup más 3 posible < para PRO$_1$ estar guapa t$_3$ > ]] = $\iota$d[ $\lozenge$[ guapa (g(1), d)] &
$\forall$d' [$\lozenge$[ guapa (g(1), d') & d$\neq$d'] ! d' < d]]

Internally, the degree phrase is analyzed as a partitive over degrees (parallel to partitive constructions over individuals such as *the tallest of the boys*). It is composed in three steps. First, *más* creates a total ordering of degrees. Second, sup turns the ordered set into a singleton containing

the maximal degree. Lastly, the definite determiner performs a "uniqueness test" and return the unique maximal degree. This degree in turn measures the degree of the property denoted by *guapa*. The whole sentence then asserts that Maria wanted to be *that* pretty, where *that* is equal to the maximal degree such that she cannot possibly be prettier than that.

## References

Romero, Maribel (2013). "Modal superlatives: a compositional analysis". In: *Natural language semantics* 21.1, pp. 79-110.
Schwarz, Bernhard (2005). "Modal superlatives". In: *Semantics and Linguistic Theory*. Vol. 15, pp. 187{
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