

Superlatives and definiteness: Lessons from Romance

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Abstract

Previous research on superlatives in Romance languages has established three major types: (i) in Italian and Ibero-Romance, the definite article does not form part of the superlative, except for modal superlatives; (ii) in French, a definite article form functions as a superlative marker in some positions (DP-external, quantity and postnominal superlatives) but not in prenominal superlatives; (iii) in Romanian, the marker *cel*, historically identical to the strong definite article form, has been generalized as a superlative marker. I investigate the distributional and semantic correlates of this threefold distinction. I argue that in Romanian prenominal superlatives may sit in SpecDP, which explains the availability of relative readings, whereas in types (i) and (ii) they sit in a dedicated SpecSupP position, which is a scope position. Moreover, the existence of an overt marker allows Romanian prenominal superlatives to combine with determiners other than the definite D. The restrictions on the distribution of DP-external and quantity superlatives in type (i) are analyzed using a specific version of Heim’s (1999) raising analysis. Finally, I discuss

the consequences of the data of Romance for the general debate concerning relative superlatives.

Keywords: superlative, relative vs. absolute, definiteness, Romance.

1. Introduction

In all Romance languages, superlatives lack dedicated morphemes and superlative meanings are usually expressed by combining comparatives with definite article forms or embedding them in definite environments. Previous research showed that Romance languages can be divided into three major types according to the status of the definite article forms that occurs in superlative environments³³³: (i) in Italian and Ibero-Romance, the article is always the regular definite D, except for modal superlatives, where it can occur as a degree morpheme (Loccioni 2018, 2019)¹ – see the Italian examples in (1), which show that *il* ‘the’ cannot occur with adverbs (1a), in postnominal position (1b) and in prenominal position after a cardinal; (ii) in French, the article functions a superlative marker (part of DegP) in certain positions (predicative, adverbial, postnominal, and with quantity superlatives,) but not in prenominal positions (Loccioni 2018, Dobrovie-Sorin 2021) – see the French examples in (1), which show that *le* ‘the’ occurs in adverbial and postnominal positions, but not in prenominal position after a cardinal; (iii) in Romanian the article has become a superlative marker across the board, forming a constituent with the comparative also in prenominal positions (Giurgea 2013, Croitor & Giurgea 2016) – see *cel* in the Romanian examples in (1).

- (1) a. Adverbial
- | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|------|----------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| quello | che | parla | (*il) | più | veloce | Italian |
| celui | qui | parle | le | plus | vite | French |
| cel | care | vorbește | cel | mai | repede | Romanian |
| the-one | who | speaks | the | more | fast | |
| ‘the one who speaks fastest’ | | | | | | |
- b. Postnominal
- | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| il | paese | (*il) | più | ricco | Italian |
| le | pays | le | plus | riche | French |
| | the country | the | more | rich | |
| | țara | cea | mai | bogată | Romanian |
| | country-the | the | more | rich | |
| ‘the richest country’ | | | | | |

¹ For modal superlatives, see (i), from Loccioni (2018:9, ex. 20a):

- (i) Italian
 Maria voleva essere **il** più carina possibile
 Maria wanted be.INF the.MS more kind possible
 ‘Maria wanted to be the kindest possible.’

I will not address this construction in this paper.

c. Prenominal

i	due	(*i)	più	ricchi	paesi	/	*[i	più	ricchi]	due	paesi	IT	
les	deux	(*les)	plus	riches	pays	/	*[les	plus	riches]	deux	pays	FR	
Ro.	cele	două	[cele	mai	bogate]	țări	/	[cele	mai	bogate]	două	țări	RO
	the	two	the	more	rich	countries		the	more	rich	two	countries	
	‘the two richest countries’												

My aim is to investigate the differences in the distribution and interpretation of superlative constituents associated to this tripartite distinction, adding to the results presented in Loccioni (2018), which only cover types (i)-(ii), a comparison with type (iii). My findings also bear on the general issue of the status of definiteness marking in relative superlatives, a highly debated issue in the literature on superlatives. I will first address prenominal quality superlatives (section 2), then DP-external and quantity superlatives (section 3), then postnominal superlatives (section 4). The relevance of the Romance facts for the general theory of relative superlatives will be discussed in section 5.

2. Prenominal quality superlatives

2.1. On the syntax of prenominal superlatives in Romanian

Regarding prenominal superlatives, Romanian differs from all the other Romance languages. Before pointing out the interpretative differences and proposing an analysis, I will briefly present the arguments for the Deg-operator status of *cel* in Romanian prenominal superlatives, developing the data in (1c).

Romanian normally marks definiteness by a suffix occurring on the first noun or adjective in the DP, but in certain contexts the independent form *cel* is used, e.g. before cardinals, as in the first phrase in (1c), or before an empty N (e.g. *cele* [_N∅] *albastre* ‘the.FPL blue.FPL’ = ‘the blue ones’). *Cel* is also used before the comparative marker *mai* to build the superlative and, when it occurs with adjectives, it shows agreement, having the same inflection as the determiner *cel*. Moreover, when placed at the beginning of the DP, as in the second phrase in (1c) and in (2a) below, it suffices to mark the DP as definite. In this position, at first sight it seems to be the exact counterpart of the article occurring in DPs with prenominal superlatives in other Romance languages, see (2b)–(2c).

(2)	a.	cea	mai	frumoasă	fată	Romanian
		<i>cel</i> .FSG	more	beautiful	girl	
	b.	la	plus	belle	fille	French
	c.	la	più	bella	ragazza	Italian

However, there is evidence that even in (2a), *cel* is not the D of the DP, but forms a constituent with the comparative. First, a prenominal adjective can receive the suffixal article even if it is preceded by degree words, and this includes the comparative *mai* – thus, in the combination [D [Comparative [NP]], Romanian uses the *suffixal* article on the adjective. This order is marked, displaying the non-

restrictive prenominal position of quality adjectives, but it is perfectly grammatical – see the attested example in (3):

- (3) www.cnet.ro/2008/10/15/yourmagicphotocom-mini-photofun/
 Dacă vreți o alternativă la **mai celebrul** și **mai reușitul**
 if want.2PL an alternative to more famous-the and more successful-the
 PhotoFun, ..
 PhotoFun...
 ‘If you want an alternative to the more famous and more successful PhotoFun (...)’

A defendant of the D-analysis of *cel* in (2a) might reply that prenominal superlatives involve a different structure, presumably a dedicated functional projection (e.g. SupP, as proposed by Loccioni 2018), and *cel* in (2a) is specified for selecting a SupP. Under such an analysis, in (2a) *cel* is not part of the DegP; in other words, a prenominal comparative may function as a superlative by virtue of occupying the dedicated position SpecSupP, as in French (1c)–(2b) or Italian. However, as soon as we add a constituent between the D position and the prenominal superlative, a difference appears between Romanian and the other languages: *cel* must occur in the prenominal superlative, see (4a), whereas Italian and French use a comparative without further marking, see (4b)–(4c):

- | | | |
|-----|---|----------|
| (4) | a. al doilea [cel mai bun] timp | Romanian |
| | ORD second-ORD <i>cel</i> .MSG more good time | |
| | ‘the second best time’ | |
| | b. le deuxième (*le) meilleur temps | French |
| | c. il secondo (*il) miglior tempo | Italian |
| | the second the better time | |

Under the analysis of *cel* as the regular superlative marker in (2a), the D is null and it is licensed as definite via agreement with the superlative phrase, where the definiteness feature is on *cel* (a reasonable assumption given the origin of superlative *cel*, which is, of course, the article *cel*). Definiteness checking by a phrase carrying a definiteness feature is well attested in Romanian, it can be assumed for cases such as (3) (see Cornilescu & Nicolae 2011a,b, Nicolae 2015) and even for cases when a definite-marked N occurs DP-initially – traditionally, head-movement from N to D was assumed for this case (see Dobrovie-Sorin 1987, Grosu 1988, Giusti 1991), but the possibility of coordinating definite-marked nouns under a single D, as in (5a), indicates that even in this case it is a phrasal constituent (an NP) that checks definiteness, as argued by Cinque (2004) – in (5a), the fact that a single referent is involved indicates that the NPs are coordinated under a single D. Languages with independent articles do not repeat the article here, see the Italian version in (5b):²

² An anonymous reviewer notes that in Italian a coordination of the type in (5a) may occur in predicate position:

- (i) Dimitri è [il mio miglior collega] e il più caro amico]
 Dimitri is the my best colleague and the more dear friend

- (5) a. Romanian
 Vi-l prezint pe [colegul și prietenul nostru Alex]
 2P.DAT-3MS.ACC present.1S DOM colleague-the and friend-the our Alex
 ‘Let me introduce to you our colleague and friend Alex’
- b. Italian
 Vi presento [il nostro collega e amico Alex].
 2PL.DAT-CL.ACC present.1S the our colleague and friend Alex

Further evidence for definiteness checking by a superlative phrase comes from the order Sup–Card–N in the second phrase in (1c). In DPs with cardinals and pronominal superlatives, this is in fact the preferred order, contrary to the other Romance languages (see the It. and Fr. versions of (1c)). For Italian, Loccioni (2018:21–22) claims that this order is possible with an interpretation in which groups of *n*-elements are compared. Thus, in (6a) the DP refers to a sum of presentations each of which is longer than any presentation that is not in the sum, whereas in (6b), it refers to “a pair of presentation that, as a twosome, is the longest” (Loccioni 2018:22), requiring a special context where presentations are grouped in pairs. In Romanian, (6c) allows both readings:

- (6) a. Italian, Loccioni (2018:21-22), ex. 23
 le due più lunghe presentazioni
 the two more long presentations
 ‘the two longest presentations’
- b. le più lunghe due presentazioni
 the more long two presentations
 ‘the longest two presentations (a pair that, as a twosome, is the longest)’
- c. cele mai lungi două prezentări
cel more long two presentations
 ‘the two longest presentations / the longest pair of two presentations’

The fact that the order Sup-Card-NP is the preferred order and does not involve Sup scoping over the cardinal (the domain of comparison is not formed by sums of two elements, in (6c)) indicates that the superlative DegP raises to SpecDP to check the definiteness feature. This is not the only instance of a phrase checking

But this example can be analyzed as containing a coordination of PredPs or vPs from which the copula has moved to T, rather than a coordination of DPs. In subject position, a coordination of DPs rules out a single referent, as can be seen from the impossibility of singular agreement on the verb in (ii):

- (ii) [Il mio miglior collega] e [il più caro amico] è appena entrato nella stanza
 the my best colleague and the more dear friend is just entered in-the room
 Intended: ‘My best colleague and dearest friend has just entered the room.’

Romanian allows singular number, see (iii):

- (iii) [Bunul meu coleg și prietenul meu cel mai drag] tocmai a sosit
 good-the my colleague and friend-the my SUP more dear just has arrived
 ‘My good colleague and dearest friend has just arrived.’

definiteness in SpecDP – *al*-genitives can also occur before cardinals, marking the DP as definite (*al* is a genitival marker that agrees with the possessee):³

- (7) [ai cărui] doi fii
al.MPL whose two sons

Other constituents that can mark definiteness by occupying the DP-initial position, without any additional definiteness marking, are ordinals ((8) shows that the element *al* is found with ordinals in all positions, irrespective of definiteness):

- (8) [al doilea] tren / un [al doilea] tren / trenul [al doilea]
al second train a *al* second train train-the *al* second
 ‘the second train’ ‘a second train’ ‘the second train’

Based on these arguments, we conclude that the structures underlying the superlatives in (2a) and (2b)–(2c) are different, Romanian having a DegP in SpecDP and the other languages having the article in D:

- (2)′ a. [DP [DegP cea mai frumoasă] [DØ [NP t_{DegP} fată]]] Romanian
 b. [DP [D la] [[plus belle] [fille]]] French
 c. [DP [D la] [[più bella] [ragazza]]] Italian

2.2 Prenominal superlatives and the absolute vs. relative distinction

Szabolcsi (1986) argued for a semantic distinction between two types of adnominal superlatives: ‘absolute’ superlatives, for which the description of the compared degrees is provided by DP-internal material exclusively, and ‘comparative’ superlatives (later also called ‘relative’),⁴ for which the description of the compared degrees includes DP-external material:

- (9) John climbed the highest mountain
 (a) absolute: John climbed a mountain whose height exceeds the heights of all the other mountains in the domain of discourse
 (b) relative: John climbed a mountain whose height exceeds the heights of all the mountains climbed by other people in the domain of discourse

Szabolcsi provides several reasons for representing this distinction in syntax, rather than relegating it to pragmatics: (i) DPs containing relative superlatives behave

³ This marker, like *cel*, comes from a former independent form of the definite article (< Lat. *ille*), see Pușcariu (1905), Găzdaru (1929), Giurgea (2012), a.o. The order in (7) is marked, in the standard language it is current only with *wh*-phrases, suggesting that the genitive raises by virtue of its [wh] feature and definiteness is checked as a free rider. Nouns and APs marked with the suffixal article cannot occur before cardinals, so in their case we cannot assume definiteness checking in SpecDP. The process involved may be definiteness checking via Agree (Cornilescu & Nicolae 2011a,b) or PF-lowering of D to Num (Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea 2006).

⁴ Here I adopt the term ‘relative’, which is the most widespread in recent studies. The term ‘comparative’ is misleading, because all superlatives involve comparison.

as indefinites with respect to several tests (see (10)); (ii) the clausal material that provides the domain of comparison is syntactically constrained (this material must contain a ‘licensing variable’, later called ‘correlate’, usually a focus or *wh*-element, which varies across descriptions, e.g. John in the relative reading of (9)); this licensing variable must be a clause-mate of the superlative DP, see (11), where the licensing variable/correlate is underlined); (iii) quantity superlatives (*most*, *fewest*, *less*) only allow relative readings (this is why (11a) is ill-formed).⁵

- (10) a. Who has {the smartest sister/ *the sister/ a sister}?
 b. Who did you take {the *(best) picture of/a picture of}?
- (11) a. Who_i did you claim [t_i got the fewest letters]?
 b. * Who said [that you got the fewest letters]?

Subsequent studies provided additional arguments for treating the distinction as syntactic: (i) the existence of split-scope readings, where the superlative operator takes scope above a modal and the DP takes scope below (Heim 1999, who called this reading ‘upstairs de dicto’); see (12); in Szabolcsi’s and Heim’s analysis, relative readings are obtained by raising -EST out of the DP):

- (12) JOHN wants to climb the highest mountain
 Possible reading: there is a degree *d* such that John wants there to be a *d*-high mountain that he will climb and *d* is higher than any *d*’ such that somebody different from John wants there to be a *d*’-high mountain that they should climb
 -EST $\lambda d. [\lambda y \text{ WANT } [\exists x. [x \text{ is } d\text{-high and } y \text{ climbs } x]]]$

(ii) In English, DP-initial possessors block relative readings (Chacon & Wellwood 2012, Bumford 2017):

- (13) Chacon & Wellwood (2012), (11)–(14)
 a. Ty chose the tastiest cookies of Sue’s (of all the cookies/of all the party guests).
 b. Ty chose Sue’s tastiest cookies (of all the cookies/# of all the party guests).
 c. Ty ate the most cookies of Sue’s.
 d. * Ty ate Sue’s most cookies.
- (14) Bumford (2017: 14)
 a. the student who read Shakespeare’s longest play (*relative)
 b. the student who read the longest Shakespeare play (✓ relative)
 c. the student who read the longest play of Shakespeare’s (✓ relative)

⁵ See also Gawron (1995). For *most*, the superlative of *much/many*, Hackl (2009) identified the absolute reading with the majority reading, but there is abundant cross-linguistic evidence against this identification, see Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea (2021).

For Romance languages, Cinque (2010) and Loccioni (2018) noticed that, in Italian, only *postnominal* superlatives allow relative readings (see in particular (16), which has I-level *have*, which normally takes indefinite objects):

- (15) Cinque (2010), ch. 2 exx. 23-24
 a. Chi ha scalato la più alta montagna innevata? (✓ abs., * rel.)
 who has climbed the more high mountain snowy
 b. Chi ha scalato la montagna innevata più alta? (✓ abs., ✓ rel.)
 who has climbed the mountain snowy more high
 ‘Who climbed the highest snowy mountain?’
- (16) Loccioni (2018), 41- 42
 a. # Il più grosso gatto bianco, ce l’ha Betta
 the more big cat white cl.LOC CL.ACC=has Betta
 b. Il gatto bianco più grosso, ce l’ha Betta
 the cat white more big CL.LOC CL.ACC=has Betta
 ‘It’s Betta who has the largest white cat.’

For French, the contrast in (17) regarding the availability of the split scope reading in (12) indicates a similar situation: relative readings are restricted to the postnominal position.

- (17) Alain Rouveret, p.c.
 [Context: Jean wants to climb a mountain that should be 7000m. high,
 Philippe wants to climb a mountain that should be 5000m. high,
 Paul wants to climb a mountain that should be 4000m. high, etc.]
- a. C’est Jean qui veut escalader [la montagne [la plus haute]]
 it’s Jean who wants to-climb the mountain the more high
 b. # C’est Jean qui veut escalader [la [[plus haute] [montagne]].
 it’s Jean who wants to-climb the more high mountain

By contrast, in Romanian prenominal superlatives allow relative readings. The attested examples in (18a)–(18b) show superlatives in the context of I-level *have* introducing relational nouns, which requires indefiniteness (see **John has the smart wife*). Ex. (18c) shows that relative superlatives are also allowed in postnominal position. Ex. (19) shows that prenominal superlatives allow the split-scope reading, being fine in the context in (17a).

- (18) a. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNcCIPVcIzM>
 Brânzoi are cea mai frumoasă nevastă
 Brânzoi has *cel.FSG* more beautiful wife
 b. <https://mama.md/topic/137439-de-ce/page/2/>
 cine are cel mai deștept copil, cel mai bogat soț (...)
 who has *cel* more smart child *cel* more rich husband
 ‘Who has the smartest child, the richest husband...’

- c. <https://www.adriana-nanea.ro/tipologia-trei-competitivul>
 De obicei intră în competiții subtile de genul: cine are cel mai
 usually enter.3 in competitions subtle of kind-the who has *cel* more
 mult succes la servici, cine are soția cea mai frumoasă și
 much succes at office who has wife-the *cel* more beautiful and
copiii cei mai deștepți.
 children-the *cel* more smart
 ‘(S)he/They usually get(s) into subtle competitions of the type: who has
 the most success at work, who has the most beautiful wife and the
 smartest children.’

- (19) [Context: Ion wants to climb a mountain that should be 7000m. high,
 Filip wants to climb a mountain that should be 5000m. high,
 Paul wants to climb a mountain that should be 4000m. high, etc.]
 ION vrea să urce cel mai înalt munte.
 Ion wants SUBJ climb.3 *cel* more high mountain

The restriction on relative readings in prenominal positions in French and Italian can be explained within the raising analysis of relative superlatives by assuming that the prenominal position is a *scope* position. It is well-known that superlatives obligatorily include the descriptive material of the DP in the domain of comparison – for instance, the DP in (20) picks out the elm that is higher than any other *elms* in the park, there is no reading where objects that are not elms (for instance, other trees) are included in the comparison. This restriction can be accounted for in two ways: either -EST, after combining with the adjective, takes as a second argument the rest of the NP, as in (20a) (see von Stechow 1999), or -EST raises out of the AP, scoping above a [AP+NP] constituent that provides the description of the compared degrees ($\lambda d.x$ is a *d*-high tree in the garden), as in (20b). Heim (1999) adopts the second solution, in order to provide a unitary analysis of DP-internal and DP-external -EST. Let us recall that in her analysis, which is a raising analysis, the relative vs. absolute distinction is one of scope, -EST scoping DP-internally in the absolute reading, see (20), and DP-externally in the relative reading, see (21). But in the DP-external position, there is no NP-constituent for -EST to attach to. Raising the AP together with -EST is not an option, because the property of being *d*-high does not apply to John, the correlate.

- (20) the highest elm in the park
 a. [the [[-EST high] [tree in the garden]]]
 b. [the [-EST [$\lambda d.$ *d*-high tree in the garden]]]
 (21) JOHN planted the highest elm
 John [-EST [$\lambda d.$ $\lambda x.$ [*x* planted a *d*-high elm]]]

One may also maintain the analysis in (20a), if distinct denotations are assumed for DP-internal and DP-external -EST, as proposed by Krasikova (2012). Heim (1999), in order to account for the focus sensitivity of relative superlatives, proposed a second, alternative analysis of DP-external -EST, in which -EST raises above the correlate and takes as arguments only a set of degree properties and a degree property, the set of degree properties being obtained via association with

focus – see (22), where C is a set of degree properties included in the focus value of the constituent to which C attaches, i.e., in this case, a set of degree descriptions of the form ‘ $\lambda d.x$ climbed a d-high mountain’:

(22) -EST $\lambda d.$ [[[JOHN]_F climbed a d-high mountain]] ~C]

In order to extend this analysis to absolute superlatives (a point not addressed in Heim 1999), a reduced relative structure must be assumed inside the DP, with a null relative operator PRO whose trace is F-marked, see (23); such a proposal was developed by Romero (2013).

(23) the λx [-EST [$\lambda d.$ [[x]_F [d-high mountain]]] ~C]

No matter which of these three analyses is chosen for absolute superlatives – (20a), (20b) or (23) – -EST scopes above the descriptive material of the DP.

The idea that prenominal superlatives in Italian and French occupy a scope position was defended by Loccioni (2018), who proposes a null element SUP in the periphery of the noun phrase to which the AP raises. This is compatible with the semantic analyses in (21) and (23) if we assume that the adjective reconstructs (raising of the whole DegP being an instance of pied-piping). There is some evidence that the prenominal position of superlatives is distinct from the prenominal position of non-superlative quality adjectives. For most quality adjectives, the prenominal position triggers a non-restrictive interpretation. Thus, (24a) is equivalent with ‘I’d like to read his novels, which are interesting’; the speaker expresses the wish to read all the novels by that person, adding as a backgrounded information the fact that they are interesting. In order to convey the meaning that the speaker only wishes to read a part of that author’s novels, those which are interesting, the postnominal placement must be used, as in (24b). However, the superlative in (24c) does not trigger the non-restrictive interpretation in (24a). In (24c), the speaker’s wish is restricted to a subset of the novels, those that exceed a certain level of the quality of being interesting.

(24) French

a. J’aimerais lire ses intéressants romans.

I would-like read.INF 3S.POSS interesting novels

b. J’aimerais lire ses romans intéressants.

I would-like read.INF 3S.POSS novels interesting

‘I’d like to read his/her interesting

c. J’aimerais lire ses plus intéressants romans

I would-like read.INF 3S.POSS more interesting novels

An anonymous reviewer presents some interesting Italian data that raise a problem for Loccioni’s proposal that prenominal superlatives result from movement of the AP to a peripheral position. On the one hand, in case of two prenominal adjectives that tend to occur in a fix order $A_1 > A_2$, see *recente* ‘recent’ and *grande* ‘big, great’ in (25a), the order tends to be reversed if A_2 is in the superlative, see (25b)–(25c), which supports the movement hypothesis. However, adjectives that must be postnominal, such as *italiano* ‘Italian’, keep this restriction in the superlative, see (25d).

- (25) Italian
- a. le (??grandi) recenti (grandi) migrazioni verso l'Europa
 the great recent great migrations toward Europe
 'the recent great migrations toward Europe'
- b. ? le più grandi recenti migrazioni verso l'Europa
 the more great recent migrations toward Europe
 'the greatest recent migrations toward Europe'
- c. ?? le recenti più recenti migrazioni verso l'Europa
 the recent more great migrations toward Europe
- d. i suoi (*italiani/*più italiani) tratti (italiani/più italiani)
 the 3S.POSS Italian / more Italian features Italian/more Italian
 'his/her most Italian features'

A solution to the problem raised by (25d) would be to impose a locality or featural constraint for AP raising to SpecSupP, restricting it to constituents that are already in a peripheral position or bear the features that allow them to occupy such a position in the first place. Pursuing the second alternative, I propose that a lexical feature [quality] distinguishes between *grande* 'big, great' in (25a)–(25c) and *Italiano* in (25d). Sup only attracts overtly DegPs bearing [quality]. The requirement of a [+quality] constituent does not apply to the covert raising of -EST to SpecSup, which accounts for the absolute reading of postnominal superlatives (see the postnominal placement of *più italiani* in (25d)⁶.

Note now that in Romanian prenominal superlatives do not show this restriction, see (25').

⁶ Another issue raised by an anonymous reviewer is the co-occurrence of two absolute superlatives in the same DP, in Italian, one prenominal and one postnominal:

- (i) Italian
 i più interessanti romanzi più venduti
 the more interesting novels more sold
 'the most interesting of the best sellers'

If the absolute reading requires -EST in SpecSupP at LF, we should conclude either that Sup allows multiple specifiers in Italian, or that there can be multiple Sup positions (Loccioni 2018 actually noticed that there are two different positions of prenominal superlatives with respect to cardinals, see (6a)–(6b) above). Another possibility is that in such examples the postnominal DegP is a comparative that receives a superlative interpretation by setting its covert argument to 'the others'. In Romanian, examples with two superlatives are not acceptable (see (ii)); if the second DegP is a comparative, the acceptability improves, but the comparative is not interpreted exactly as a plural superlative, in that the threshold of the degree is set rather low (a paraphrase would be 'novels that can sell rather well'):

- (ii) ?? cele mai interesante romane cele mai vândute
 SUP.FP more interesting novels SUP.FP more sold
- (iii) ? cele mai interesante romane mai vândute
 SUP.FP more interesting novels more sold

- (25) Romanian
- a. *italienele trăsături ale lui
 Italian-the features GEN his
- b. cele mai italiene trăsături ale lui
 SUP.FP more Italian.FP features(F) GEN his
 ‘his most Italian features’

The idea of a SupP projection has semantic plausibility: given that superlatives differ from other adjectival projections by being able to take scope over the rest of the descriptive material of the DP, a functional projection can be used to mark this scope, bearing an operator feature checked by a superlative in its specifier. As a scope-related position, SpecSup involves *riterial freezing* (see Rizzi 2006 on this notion): the superlative cannot move outside the DP at LF, which explains why relative readings are impossible.

In Romanian, relative readings are allowed because the prenominal superlatives in examples (18)–(19) sit in SpecDP, which is not a scope position. Under a raising analysis, this position can be seen as an intermediate step in the raising of -EST to a clausal position.

Summing up, the hypothesis of two distinct structures for Romance prenominal superlatives (see (26) and (2)′ above) explains the difference in the availability of relative readings:

- (26) a. [_{DP} DegP [[_D∅] [_{..t}_{DegP} NP]]] (Romanian)
 b. [_D [_{SupP} DegP [_{Sup}⁰ [_{..t}_{DegP} NP]]]] (other Romance languages)

2.3 Compatibility with other determiners

Besides the position, there is another important difference between Romanian and the other Romance languages with respect to prenominal superlatives: as can be seen in (2), the superlative constituent is formally identical to a comparative in the other Romance languages, including French, whereas in Romanian it is distinguished from the comparative by the marker *cel*. Adopting a decomposition of superlatives into two heads Sup and Comp, as proposed by Bobaljik (2012) as a linguistic universal,⁷ we may assume that the other Romance languages have a null Sup which is licensed in SpecSupP. (As we will see in the next section, Loccioni (2018) proposed a null Sup for DP-external and quantity superlatives in the Italian-type languages.) In the following, I will use Sup for the element which, added to the comparative, yields a superlative denotation, and -EST for the resulting denotation, which would correspond to a Sup+Comp complex in Dunbar & Welwood’s (2016) analysis.

If we compare the compatibility of superlatives with various determiners in Romanian and the other Romance languages, it becomes clear that sitting in SpecSup is not sufficient for licensing the null Sup. The determiner of the DP is also relevant: it must be the definite article or at least contain the definite article – see the so-called “possessive determiners” of French and Spanish, which are definite Ds that

⁷ For semantic analyses of this structure, in which the denotation of the superlative is obtained by applying an operator to the comparative, see Dunbar & Welwood (2016), Bumford & Sharvit (2022).

incorporate a pronominal possessor (ex. (27)). Demonstratives are excluded in French, Italian and Spanish, see (28):

- (27) French
 le/mon plus fidèle ami
 the/my more loyal friend
 ‘the/my most loyal friend’
- (28) a. Roussarie & Van Peteghem (2021:1701)
 cette plus grande maîtrise des sociétés forestières sur...
 this more big control of companies forest.ADJ on
 ✓ comparative, *superlative
- b. Italian, Loccioni (2018:20), ex. 19
 * quella più bella ragazza
 that more beautiful girl
- c. Spanish, Bosque et Brucart (1991), ex. 3
 * esa mejor corbata
 this better tie

In Romanian, due to their overt marking, superlatives are compatible with other determiners such as the demonstrative and the indefinite article.

Given that demonstratives are normally used when the descriptive material alone does not guarantee uniqueness (see Nowak 2019), their use with the superlative, which does guarantee uniqueness, may seem surprising, and it is indeed rare. However, I did find attested examples, which show why the co-occurrence of a demonstrative and a superlative in the same DP may be useful for communication: the identity of the referent is established via the demonstrative, and the superlative provides additional information about this referent. Without the demonstrative, a definite DP with a superlative could have been interpreted as referring to a different entity. For instance, in (29), which occurs in a live commentary of a tennis match, the demonstrative establishes the referent as being the current game, and the superlative qualifies this game:

- (29) https://www.dcnews.ro/simona-halep-julia-goerges-live-text-in-turul-trei-de-la-miami-sambata-de-la-ora-21-00_501110.html
 Răsturnări de situație în **acest cel mai lung game** de până acum al
 upheavals of situation in this *cel* more long game of until now GEN
 meciului
 match-the.GEN
 ‘upheavals in this longest game so far of the match’

In (30), the demonstrative is used anaphorically. The previous text reported that the association of primary school teachers organized their 36th international forum. The demonstrative ensures the anaphoric link, and the superlative introduces further information about the referent. Without the demonstrative, the DP could be interpreted as introducing a new referent:

(30) <https://www.glsa.ro/asociatia-invatatorilor-organizat-cel-de-al-xxxvi-forum-international/>

1500 de dascăli au participat la Suceava, Cernăuți, Chișinău și
 1500 of teachers have participated in Suceava Cernăuți Chișinău and
 Eforie Sud la a XXXVI-a ediție a **acestui cel mai mare forum**
 Eforie Sud at al 26-ORD edition GEN this.GEN *cel* more large forum
 anual de dezbatere din învățământul românesc.
 annual of debate from education-system Romanian
 ‘1500 teachers participated in Suceava, Cernăuți, Chișinău and Eforie Sud
 in this largest annual debate forum in the Romanian education system’

These data show that demonstratives are not incompatible with uniquely referring descriptions (supporting Blumberg’s 2020 rejection of Nowak’s 2019 claim): its use may be crucial for identifying the referent of this description with an old discourse referent.

With the indefinite article, superlatives are typically found in contexts where the existence of a referent satisfying the description is at stake:

(31) <http://www.cumsaorice.ro/>

Dacă considerăm că există **un cel mai mare număr**, ...
 if consider.1PL that exists a *cel* more large number
 ‘If we consider that there is a largest number,...’

(32) <https://papusimcurania.ro/>.

Toate micile prințese (...) visează (...) să găsească **un cel mai bun prieten**
 all little princesses dream SBJV find.3 a SUP more good friend
 ‘All little princesses dream to find a best friend’

As the definite article brings in a presupposition of existence, it is avoided in cases where the existence of a satisfier of the description is explicitly asserted or is under discussion.⁸

The only instance of a distributive quantifier used with a superlative in the Corola corpus involves a conceptual unit functioning as a name of kind – ‘smallest

⁸ Examples where the indefinite is used because the uniqueness presupposition is not satisfied are very rare and seem to be based on an interpretation of ‘an A-est N’ as ‘one of the A-est Ns’. For me, such examples are ungrammatical. Herdan & Sharvit (2006), using English examples, claim that lack of uniqueness may result from a more general semantics of superlatives, in which EST takes a set of comparison classes and yields the property of being the maximal element in one of these classes – e.g. *best student* interpreted as *best student in some class*:

- (i) The dean praised some best student (Herdan & Sharvit 2006, ex. 6)
- (ii) Sonia decided that she would marry some richest eligible bachelor; preferably the richest bachelor among the tennis players, but he could also be the richest bachelor among the art collectors or the richest bachelor among the yacht-owners (ibid. ex. 8)

The Romanian counterparts of (i)-(ii) are unacceptable according to my intuitions and those of other people I asked. As I could not find any examples of this type in the Corola corpus or on Google, I conclude that this type of interpretation is not available in Romanian.

packaging unit’, understood as ‘packaging unit of the smallest side’ (there are three examples, in the same text of law):

- (33) <https://lege5.ro/>
 Operatorii economici (...) trebuie să marcheze explozivii și
 operators-the economic must SBJV mark.3 explosives-the and
fiecare cea mai mică unitate de ambalare a acestora cu un
 each *cel* more small unit of packaging GEN these.GEN with a
 marcaj de identificare unică
 mark of identification unique
 ‘Economic operators (...) must mark explosives and each of their smallest
 packaging units with a unique identification mark’

In French, the use of indefinite determiners with superlatives is much more restricted. It is only possible with well-established conceptual units such as ‘greatest common divisor’ (A. Rouveret, p.c.):

- (34) Alors, d est un plus grand diviseur commun de a et b
 then d is a more great divisor common of a and b
 (Gilles Bailly-Maître, *Arithmétique et cryptologie*, 2nd edition, p. 73)

3. DP-external superlatives and quantity superlatives

The detailed analysis in Loccioni (2018) established that for adverbial, predicative and quantity superlatives (where by ‘predicative superlatives’ we refer to a DegP in predicate position, not to a superlative inside an elliptical DP functioning as a predicate), the superlative is marked by a definite article form in French (see (35a), (37a), (38a)), whereas Italian and Spanish use a form identical with the comparative. She also showed that this difference is correlated with a distributional difference: the comparative forms with a superlative interpretation of Spanish and Italian are licensed in specific contexts (see (36) for adverbs), whereas in French their distribution is unrestricted. The typical licensing context involves embedding the superlative in a relative clause inside a definite DP, with the correlate of the superlative being the relative operator (see (36c), (37c’)); the same holds for Spanish, according to Bosque & Bruccart 1991). Expectedly, Romanian, with its superlative marker *cel*, behaves like French (see (35b), (37b)). In predicative positions, the article used as a superlative marker may lack agreement (Grevisse 2008:1229-1230, Roussarie & Van Peteghem 2021:1703 for French, and Croitor & Giurgea 2016 for Romanian, see the masculine form in (37a)–(37b), a default form that is also used with adverbs, cf. (35)):

- (35) a. French
 Marie écrit le mieux.
 Marie writes the better

- b. Romanian
 Maria scrie cel mai bine.
 Maria writes *cel* more good
 ‘Maria writes the best.’
- (36) a. Italian, Loccioni (2018:184)
 * Maria scrive il meglio.
 Maria writes the best
- b. Maria scrive meglio (✓ comparative, *superlative)
 Maria writes better
 ‘Maria writes better/*the best.’
- c. Maria è **[quella che scrive meglio]**. (✓ comparative, ✓ superlative)
 Maria is the-one that writes better
 ‘Maria is the one who writes the best/better.’
- (37) Intended meaning: ‘Maria was happier in 1999 than in any other year’:
- a. French
 Marie a été la/ le plus heureuse en 1999
 Marie has been the.FS/the.MS more happy in 1999
- b. Romanian
 Maria a fost cea/%cel mai fericită în 1999
 Maria has been *cel*.FS/MS more happy in 1999
- c. # Maria è stata la più felice nel 1999 (Italian)
 Maria fue la más feliz en 1999 (Spanish)
 Maria was the more happy in 1999
 only the reading: ‘Maria was happier than any other person’
- c’. # Maria è stata più felice nel 1999 (Italian)
 Maria fue más feliz en 1999 (Spanish)
 Maria was more happy in 1999
 only the reading: ‘Maria was happier in 1999’
- c''. 1999 è [l’ anno [in **cui** Maria è stata **più felice**]] (Italian)
 1999 es [el año [en **que** Maria fue **más feliz**]] (Spanish)
 1999 is the year in which Maria was more happy
- (38) a. French
 Marie a le plus d’argent.
 Marie has the more of money
- b. Romanian
 Maria are cei mai mulți bani.
 Maria has *cel* more much money
 ‘Maria has the most money.’
- c. Italian
 * Maria ha i più soldi.
 Maria has the more money
- c’. Maria ha più soldi. (✓ comparative, *superlative)
 Maria has more money
 ‘Maria has {more/*the most} money.’

- c''. Maria è [**quella** [**che** ha **più** soldi]] (✓ superlative, ✓ comparative)
 Maria is the-one that has more money
 'Maria is the one who has {more/the most} money.'

For the restrictions in Italian-type languages, Loccioni (2018) proposes that the covert Sup operator, which is a maximalizing operator over degrees, must be licensed by being in the scope of the definite D, which is also a maximalizing operator. But, as Dobrovie-Sorin (2023) noticed (based on the observation of an anonymous reviewer), being in the scope of a definite D is not sufficient, see (39), where the comparative does not have a superlative reading (this is an instance of postnominal comparative, but Loccioni's rule is meant to cover postnominal superlatives, as in (1b)):

- (39) gli amici di persone più povere (✓ comparative, *superlative)
 the friends of persons more poor
 'the friends of {poorer/*the poorest} people'

What is crucial for the superlative interpretation in (36c), (37c''), (38c'') is that the definite article binds the correlate variable – see e.g. *l'anno* in (37c''), an example where years are compared.

Moreover, most Italian speakers I consulted allow superlative readings in clefts. For instance, a superlative interpretation for (40a) was judged fine by 6 informants, somewhat marginal by one person and bad by only one informant. The sentences in (40b)–(40c) were provided by a native speaker (and checked with other speakers) as clear examples of comparative with superlative interpretations:

- (40) a. È nel 1987 [**che** è stata **più felice** Maria] (It.) %✓ superlative
 is in-the 1987 that has been more happy Maria
 'It's in 1987 that Maria was happiest.'
- b. Silvio Cruschina, p.c.
 Tra tutti i paesi che ho visitato, è in Italia [**che** ho
 among all the countries that have.1S visited is in Italy that have.1S
 mangiato **meglio**]
 eaten better
 'Among/Of all the countries I visited, it's in Italy that I ate best.'
- c. Silvio Cruschina, p.c.
 Maria non ha avuto una vita facile, ma fino ad oggi è nel 1987
 Maria not has had a life easy but until today is in 1987
 [**che** è stata **più felice**.
 that is been more happy
 'Maria didn't have an easy life, but until now it's in 1987 that she was happiest.'

d. Silvio Cruschina, p.c.

Tra tutti i paesi del mondo, è in Olanda **che** ci sono
among all the countries of-the world is in Netherlands that CL.LOC are
più mulini a vento.
more mills at wind
'Among all the countries in the world, it's in the Netherlands that there
are the most windmills.'

Superlative interpretations are also acceptable, for some speakers, in interrogatives – (41) was judged fine by 5 informants, bad by two and marginal by one:

- (41) % In **che anno** ha guadagnato di **più**?
in which year has earned of more
'In which year did (s)he earn the most?'

In view of these facts, I propose that the licensing element is in fact the correlate: the position to which -EST raises must be overtly signaled as an Operator-variable construction. Among these constructions, relative operators are available as licensers for all speakers, whereas some speakers accept clefts and wh- operators as licensors. As we have seen in 2.2 above (see (21)–(22)), Heim proposed two analyses for structures with a DP-external item functioning as a correlate: in the first one, where -EST includes an entity argument (the correlate), -EST raises to a <e,t>-denoting constituent, a lambda-abstract on the correlate, and takes as arguments a comparison class conceived as a set of entities (C in the formula in (42)), a relation between degrees and entities (R in the formula) and an entity (the correlate):

- (42) *Analysis I* (A1), cf. Heim (1999), formula 10 and fn. 8
Mary writes best
LF: $Mary_2 [[C \text{-EST}_1] [1 [2 [t_2 \text{ writes } t_1\text{-good}]]]]$
 $[[\text{-EST}] = \lambda C_{et} \lambda R_{\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle} \lambda x \exists d (R(d)(x) \wedge \forall y ((y \in C \wedge y \neq x) \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y)))$
Presuppositions: $x \in C \wedge \forall y (y \in C \rightarrow \exists d R(d)(y))$

In the second analysis, -EST raises above the correlate, attaching to a proposition-denoting constituent (type t in the analysis she proposes, which omits possible worlds for simplicity reasons). The proposition contains a focus that provides the set of compared degree properties C, which is the first argument of -EST; the second argument, obtained by QR of -EST, is a property of degrees, characterized as containing a degree that is not found in any other degree property in C:

- (43) *Analysis II* (A2), cf. Heim (1999), formula 65
Mary writes best
LF: $[C \text{-EST}_1] [1 [[Mary]_F \text{ writes } t_1\text{-good}]] \sim C]$
 $[[\text{-EST}] = \lambda C_{\langle dt, t \rangle} \lambda P_{dt} \exists d (P(d) \wedge \forall Q ((Q \in C \wedge Q \neq P) \rightarrow \neg Q(d)))$
Presuppositions: $P \in Q \wedge \exists Q \in C: Q \neq P$

The fact that for licensing a superlative interpretation an operator-variable structure is crucial, rather than focus, supports, in my opinion, the first analysis (A1). Relative clauses make the necessary lambda-abstraction of the correlate explicit – e.g., the property ‘be a year in which Maria was d-happy’ in (39c’). I propose that the restricted superlative of Italian-type languages comes with an Op feature that must be checked by the operator to which -EST raises at LF. This feature can always be a relative-Op feature, but it can also be a cleft-Op or interrogative-Op feature, for the speakers who allow (40)–(41).

The literature contains nevertheless some strong arguments for A2: there are constructions in which the set of degree properties functioning as the first argument of -EST in A2 (see C in (43)) corresponds to an overt constituent: a modal + an elided clause in modal superlatives, according to Romero (2013), or a degree relative clause in a construction discovered by Howard (2014), see (44).

(44) Mary sang the loudest that any soprano ever sang (Howard 2014:ex.21b)

But, crucially, in these cases the C argument is overt. What I would like to argue is that if we adopt A1 for cases with no overt degree clause argument, we may dispense with the covert C altogether. Note indeed that C acts as a domain restrictor, and with other quantifiers such as determiners, there is evidence for encoding domain restriction in the situation argument (all predicates, including nominal and adjectival ones, are evaluated with respect to a situation, which includes the world and time parameters) – see Schwarz (2009) and references therein for evidence that the situation of evaluation is introduced as an argument of D and plays the role of domain restrictions. Krasikova (2012) already noticed that given the domain restrictions that come with any DP, a C argument is superfluous in absolute superlatives. But we can use the situation argument instead of C for relative superlatives as well, provided that we adopt a revised version of A1: instead of a third argument C, it suffices to say that x in (42) is compared to all other entities y that have R at a certain degree *in the situation* s – see (45), where the parts of the formula in (42) that have been changed are boldfaced:⁹

⁹ Some researchers include a further definedness condition which excludes domains with one element – see e.g. Hackl (2009), or, for A2, Heim (1999:(65)). For (45), this would mean that there should be an entity y distinct from x that satisfies R to some degree in s . I tend to believe that such a condition would be too strong. Take the sentence (i) and suppose that one of the classes contains a single check player, Mary:

- (i) From each class they selected the best check player.

I think that (i) implies that they selected Mary. If there had been a requirement that the domain of comparison of EST should consist of at least two elements, Mary’s class should have been irrelevant for (i) (assuming that the universal requires that none of its cases be false). See also (ii):

- (ii) Everybody talked about his most recent book.

If John belongs to the people quantified over in (ii) and he wrote a single book, it seems that the sentence implies that he talked about his book.

The infelicity of the sentence *#You’re the best mother I have* (cited by Hackl (2009) as evidence for the exclusion of domains with a single element) can be due to the fact that

- (45) $\llbracket \text{-EST} \rrbracket = \lambda R_{\langle d, \langle e, s, t \rangle \rangle} \lambda x. \lambda s. \exists d [R(d)(x)(s) \wedge \forall y [(y \neq x \wedge \exists d' R(d')(y)(s)) \rightarrow \neg R(d)(y)(s)]]$
 definedness condition: $\exists d R(d)(x)(s)$

Given that a situation argument is present with all predicates (nouns, verbs, adjectives), the proposal in (45) is more economical than (42), dispensing us with a covert argument specific to superlatives. Moreover, the instances of overt arguments that have been argued to represent C are too exceptional to indicate to the language learner the existence of a covert C argument in all superlatives: modal superlatives of the type *the largest possible present* are not commonly used, and Howard-type degree clauses of the type in (44) are absent altogether in some languages, such as Romanian, where no example of a Howard-type degree clause can be constructed – see (46), where four attempts of rendering (44) are shown to be ill-formed:

- (46) * Maria a cântat cel mai tare {ce /care / (din) cât } a cântat
 Maria has sung *cel* more loud that/that/ (of) how-much has sung
 vreodată o soprană.
 ever a soprano

I conclude that a single general entry of -EST without a covert C argument can cover both absolute (DP-internal) superlatives and DP-externally interpreted superlatives. A special entry with a degree clause argument is only to be assumed *when this argument is overt*, as in modal superlatives and Howard-type constructions. Note moreover that modal superlatives in Romance show a number of special properties which indicate that they are not always run-of-the-mill superlatives, as extensively argued in Loccioni (2018). For instance, they allow a form of the definite article acting as a superlative operator, see (47a). Interestingly, in the corresponding example, where the superlative is in predicative position and Maria is not compared with other individuals, Romanian does not use its superlative *cel*, but another degree operator, *cât* (lit. ‘as/how-much’):

- (47) a. Italian
 Maria doveva essere {il/Ø/ ??la} più carina possibile
 Maria had to-be the.MS/the.FS more pretty possible
 ‘Maria had to be the prettiest possible.’ (Loccioni 2018:76, ex.26)
 b. Romanian
 Maria trebuia să fie {cât / #cea/*cel} mai drăguță posibil.
 Maria had SBJV be.3 as-much/*cel*.FS/*cel*.MS more kind possibly

This supports the hypothesis that superlative constructions with special clausal arguments involve special operators, different from the -EST in run-of-the-mill superlatives.

Finally, the fact that quantity superlatives behave, in Romance, like DP-external superlatives should come as no surprise given all the analyses I have been

the sentence is totally uninformative (note that having the property *good* to *some* degree is compatible with being bad).

However, this matter requires further empirical research.

arguing for. First, as we have seen in §2.2, quantity superlatives can only be relative. But relative readings are excluded in prenominal positions in Italian-type languages. The null Sup is licensed either in postnominal position within a definite phrase (the type in (1b) and section 4 below) or in the dedicated SpecSupP, which is a scope position. But quantity adjectives are not used postnominally, and SpecSupP is restricted to absolute readings. By consequence, the Sup of a quantity adjective can only be licensed DP-externally, on a par with adverbial and predicative superlatives.

French and Romanian use in this case the article functioning as a Sup, exactly like for quantity and predicative superlatives (for the fact that *le* in *le plus d'argent* ‘the most money’ is not a D, see Dobrovie-Sorin 2021). Romanian provides evidence that DP-initial quantity superlatives do not involve a definite D: in this language, a preverbal object requires clitic-doubling if it is definite or D-linked (irrespective of whether it is a topic, a focus or a *wh*-phrase), see (48). But quantity superlatives can occur without the clitic, see (49a). When it is used, the clitic is associated to D-linking, or partitive specificity – the fewest among a context-given set of mistakes, exactly like for the indefinite in (49b):

- (48) Cadoul *(l)-a adus Iulia.
 present-the CL.ACC-has brought Iulia
 ‘It’s Iulia who bought the present’
- (49) a. Cele mai puține greșeli (le-)a făcut Victor.
cel.FP more few mistakes (CL.ACC)-has made Victor
 ‘It’s Victor who made the fewest mistakes.’
- b. Trei greșeli {a făcut Victor / le-a făcut Victor}.
 three mistakes has made Victor CL.ACC)-has made Victor
 ‘Victor made three mistakes/three of the mistakes.’

4. Postnominal superlatives

In order to complete the picture, I will briefly address postnominal superlatives. As we have seen in (1b), resumed below, they show an article form before the comparative in French and Romanian – in the latter, this is the ubiquitous *cel* – and no marking in Italian and Ibero-Romance (represented here by Spanish):

- (50) il paese (*il) più ricco Italian
 el país (*el) más rico Spanish
 le pays **le** plus riche French
 the country the more rich
 țara **cea** mai bogată Romanian
 country-the *cel* more rich
 ‘the richest country’

Loccioni (2018) proposes that *le* in French is the same Sup that occurs in predicative, quantity and adverbial superlatives, and that Italian and Ibero-Romance

have the same null Sup we have seen in section 3, which is licensed here by the definite D of the DP. The superlative is analyzed as the predicate of a reduced.¹⁰

I agree with this proposal, but I would like to add a significant fact not mentioned by Loccioni, who did not examine the data of Romanian or the compatibility with other determiners in French. We have seen in section 2.3 that prenominal superlatives are compatible with determiners other than definite D in Romanian – demonstratives, the indefinite article. Quite surprisingly, postnominal superlatives appear to be incompatible with the indefinite article:

- (51) dacă ar exista {un cel mai mare număr / ??un număr cel mai mare}
if would exist a *cel* more large number a number *cel* more large

For demonstratives, the postnominal is possible (see (52)), but seems to be less usual than the prenominal placement (thus, no example of this order could be found in the Corola corpus):

- (52) <http://stiri.tvr.ro/>
Acest punct cel mai vestic al Americii,...
this point *cel* more western GEN America.GEN
'This westernmost point of America.' (

In French, where the indefinite article can occur with conceptual units such as 'greatest common divisor', see (34), the postnominal placement is ruled out:

- (53) Il existe un (plus grand) diviseur commun (*le plus grand)
it exists a more great divisor common the more great

I propose that these restrictions are due to the fact that the reduced relative containing the superlative is selected by the determiner – by the definite D in French, by the definite and the demonstrative in Romanian.

5. Discussion: consequences for the analysis of relative superlatives

As explained in section 2.2, under the raising analysis the DP containing a relative superlative is interpreted as an indefinite (see Heim 1999, who claims that *the* is erased and interpreted as *a*), which is supported by the indefinite-like behavior discovered by Szabolcsi (1986). In spite of this indefinite-like behavior, the consistent use of the definite article with relative superlatives, not only in English but also in other article languages, constitutes a problem for the raising analysis. Szabolcsi (1986) suggested that THE in relative superlatives is part of the DegP, rather than being the D of the DP, an idea further developed by Krasikova (2012), who analyzes THE as a maximalizing operator over degrees. The facts of Romance disprove this analysis: as we have seen in section 2.2, postnominal superlatives,

¹⁰ A reduced relative analysis for postnominal superlatives was also proposed by Kayne (2008), but Loccioni argues against some details of his analysis – first of all, against the idea that the second article that appears in French, before the comparative, is the highest D of the structure.

which contain a definite D separated from the superlative, always allow relative readings:

- (54) Chi vuole scalare [la montagna [più alta]]? Italian
 Qui veut escalader [la montagne [la plus haute]]? French
 Cine vrea să urce [muntele [cel mai înalt]]? Romanian
 who wants to-climb the-mountain highest
 ‘Who wants to climb the highest mountain?’

Interestingly, there are some article languages in which nominals with relative superlatives may appear bare (Swedish, Bulgarian, see Coppock & Josefsson 2015, Pancheva & Tomaszewicz 2012, Mostrov 2021) but I know of no article language in which an overt indefinite D occurs in DPs with relative superlatives.

The use of the definite article in DPs with relative superlatives has been taken as an argument for ‘in-situ’ analyses, in which -EST remains DP-internal and the relative reading is achieved via other mechanisms: thus, Pancheva & Tomaszewicz (2012) argue that when the definite article is used, relative readings are achieved without raising -EST out of the DP, by restricting the comparison class via association with focus (following a suggestion in Heim 1999). Farkas & Kiss (2000) derive relative readings without raising -EST by putting an association relation into the semantics of N; Coppock & Beaver (2014) build on this idea, placing the association relation into the semantics of -EST. Sharvit & Stateva (2000) use regular contextual restrictions for deriving the relative interpretation, except for upstairs de dicto readings for which they propose a special property-denotation. The Romance data presented in this article are problematic for all these analyses, because they indicate the existence of *syntactic* constraints on relative readings: we have seen in section 2.2 that the prenominal placement of superlatives disallows relative readings in French and Italian. It is not clear why the prenominal placement of superlatives would interfere with the various mechanisms used for deriving relative readings in in-situ analyses. Recall that the raising analysis offers a straightforward account here: SpecSupP is a scope position. This analysis also explains why Romanian does not show this restriction – in Romanian, prenominal superlatives can sit in SpecDP.¹¹

But this brings us back to the problem of the presence of the definite article and the unavailability of the indefinite article with relative superlatives. An attempt to reconcile the definite article with a raising analysis can be found Bumford (2017), who proposes to split the definite article into two components, a determiner interpreted as an existential and a uniqueness component that acts as a filter on variable assignments and raises out of the DP, above the position of -EST. This account requires a dynamic semantics (see also Bumford & Sharvit 2022 for an explicit formalism) and cannot explain Heim’s upstairs de dicto readings (see (12) in section 2.2).

Giurgea (2021) and Dobrovie-Sorin (2021) proposed a syntactic account: assuming that -EST must use SpecDP as an escape-hatch in order to raise out of the DP, they propose that, in passing through SpecDP, -EST agrees with D in a definiteness/maximality feature which is manifested as an uninterpretable [+def] on

¹¹ Evidence for syntactic constraints on relative readings has also been found in English, see ex. (13)–(14) in section 2.2.

D. As a result, D, although it has an indefinite (existential) semantics, is spelled-out as the definite article. This account is still unsatisfactory: besides the fact that there are no other examples that support this type of agreement, we still expect to find languages where D surfaces as an indefinite, because agreement phenomena are typically language-specific. But all the data we know of show that D is either definite or is not spelled-out at all (the latter situation is encountered, as an option, in relative superlatives in Bulgarian (Pancheva & Tomaszewicz 2012, Mostrov 2021), Swedish (Coppock & Josefson 2015), and Norwegian (Simonenko 2012)).

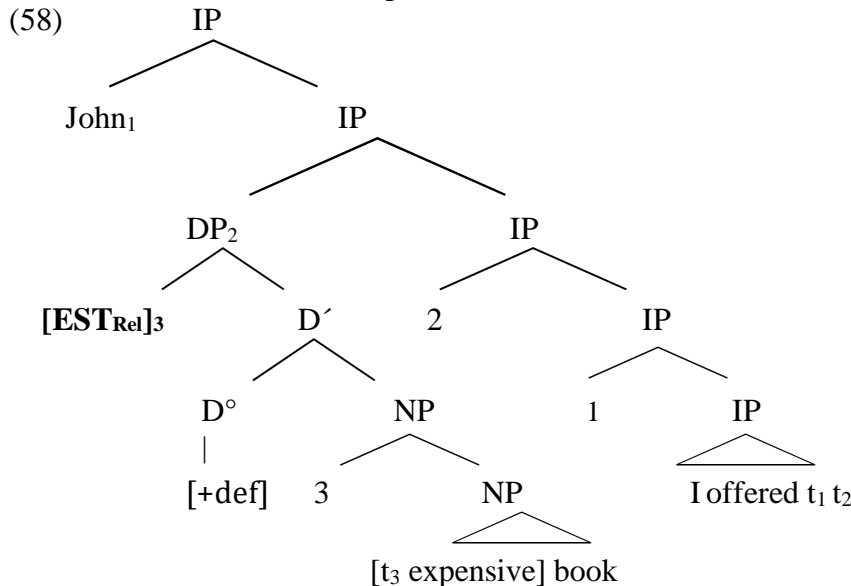
An account which solves the issue of the absence of indefinite determiners in relative superlatives was proposed in Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea (2023): in adnominal quality relative superlatives, EST occupies SpecDP at LF (instead of being raised outside the DP) and is interpreted as a quantificational determiner. The entire DP raises to a scope position below the correlate. This type of raising is not unprecedented, it was used by Solomon (2009) for the internal reading of *the same* in sentences of the type *The same waiter served everyone*. The semantics for relative EST proposed by Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea (2023) is shown in (55).

$$(55) \quad \llbracket \text{EST}_{\text{Rel}} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle d, \langle e, st \rangle \rangle} . \lambda R_{\langle e, \langle e, st \rangle \rangle} . \lambda y . \lambda s . \exists x \exists d [R(x)(y)(s) \wedge P(d)(x)(s) \wedge \forall x' y' d' [[P(d')(x')(s) \wedge x' \neq x \wedge R(x')(y')(s)] \rightarrow d > d']]$$

An example such as (56), with *John* the correlate, will have the LF in (57), represented in a tree format in (58).

(56) I offered the most expensive book to [JOHN]_{Correlate}.

(57) [John [[EST [3 [t₃-expensive book]]]] [2 [1 [I offered t₂ to t₁]]]



In (58), the P-argument of EST is provided by the NP, and the R argument, by the IP to which DP₂ attaches. The result is a property that applies to the correlate. The denotation of DP₂ is given in (59). By combining (59) with the denotation of the IP-sister of DP₂ and then with the denotation of John, and applying the proposition to a topic situation s*, we arrive at (60).

- (59) $\llbracket \text{the most}_{\text{Rel}} \text{ expensive book} \rrbracket = \llbracket \llbracket \text{EST} [3 \text{ [t}_3\text{-expensive book]}] \rrbracket =$
 $\lambda R_{\langle e, \langle e, st \rangle \rangle} \lambda y. \lambda s. \exists x \exists d [R(x)(y)(s) \wedge \text{book}(x)(s) \wedge \text{exp.}(d)(x)(s) \wedge$
 $\forall x', y', d' [\llbracket \text{book}(x')(s) \wedge \text{exp.}(d')(x')(s) \wedge x' \neq x \wedge R(x')(y')(s) \rrbracket \rightarrow d > d']]$
- (60) $\exists x \exists d [\text{offer}(x)(\text{Speaker})(s^*) \wedge \text{book}(x)(s^*) \wedge \text{exp.}(d)(x)(s^*) \wedge$
 $\forall x', y', d' [\llbracket \text{book}(x')(s^*) \wedge \text{exp.}(d')(x')(s) \wedge x' \neq x \wedge \text{offer}(x')(y')(s^*) \rrbracket$
 $\rightarrow d > d']]$

D in this analysis is not interpreted at all. When it surfaces as a definite, this is due to agreement between EST_{Rel} and D. EST_{Rel} bears a [def] feature because its denotation entails ‘Russellian definiteness’ – i.e., uniqueness, but no presupposition of existence. Note indeed that the property ‘be a book offered by me to John that is expensive to a degree d that is not attained by any other book x' that was offered by me to someone in the relevant situation’ is satisfied by at most one book.¹² The indefinite behavior of DPs with relative superlatives (Szabolcsi 1986) is explained by the fact that EST_{Rel} does not introduce a presupposition of existence.

A disadvantage of this analysis, compared to Heim’s analyses presented in section 3, see (42)-(43), is that EST does not have a uniform semantics. Moreover, this analysis does not allow a treatment of upstairs de dicto readings (see (12) and (61) below) by split scope, as in Heim’s analyses. However, there is evidence against Heim’s treatment of upstairs de dicto readings by split scope. Let us consider (61), as an example of an upstairs de dicto reading. In Heim’s analyses, this example involves EST scoping above the modal and the existential below, see the LFs in (62) and (63) ((62) corresponds to Heim’s analysis with an entity argument, see (42) in section 3, while (63) corresponds to Heim’s analysis without an entity argument, see (43) in section 3).

- (61) John needs to write the longest essay.
 Scenario: John needs to write a 10-page essay, Mary needs to write an 8-page essay, Alex needs to write a 5-page essay
- (62) John $[\text{EST } \lambda d. [\lambda y. \text{NEED } [\exists x. y \text{ writes } x \text{ and } x \text{ is } d\text{-long}]]]$
- (63) C-EST $[\lambda d [[\text{John}]_F [\lambda y \text{ NEED } [\exists x. y \text{ writes } x \text{ and } x \text{ is } d\text{-long}]]]]]$

Note now that this type of readings is possible in examples with cardinals:

- (64) John needs to write the two longest essays.
 Scenario: John needs to write a 12-page essay and a 10-page essay, Mary needs to write an 8-page essay, Alex needs to write a 5-page essay

This example cannot receive the split scope analysis proposed by Heim. As the DP scopes below *need*, in Heim’s analyses the comparison would involve individuals that need to write two essays, which is not the reading that (64) has.

This indicates that upstairs de dicto readings should be treated differently. Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea (2023) propose that the DP containing the superlative has wide scope but a type-interpretation: ‘there is a specific type of essay, characterized by being d -long, such that John needs to write an essay of this type’.

¹² Note that (60) compares the relevant book (denoted by DP_2) with all other books in the relevant situation, without excluding other books given by the speaker to John.

Once there is no clear evidence for DP-external scope of EST in relative readings of quality adnominal superlatives, the absence of overt indefinite determiners can be explained by considering that the superlative itself acts as a determiner, as in Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea (2023). A DP-external scope position of EST still needs to be assumed for adverbial and quantity superlatives, which pattern alike in Romance, see section 3 above.

The fact that DP-external scope position should be limited to adverbial, predicative and quantity superlatives is supported by the data of Syrian Arabic. In this language, movement of EST can be marked overtly (see Hallman 2016, 2022, Hallman & Pallottino 2022):

- (65) a. Hallman (2016), ex. 47
 sāra **aʔall** wahd-e ʒammaʕ-at **tawāʔiʕ**
 Sarah least one-F collected-F signatures
 ‘Sarah collected the least signatures.’
 b. Hallman & Pallottino (2022), ex. 10a
aktar ʕām kām-it Maria **mabsūʕ-a** fī-h
 more year was-3FS Maria happy-FS in-it
 ‘the year in which Maria was happiest (happier than in any other year)’

The interesting thing is that no such overt movement has been reported for adnominal *quality* relative superlatives. According to Hallman (2016), (66) does not have a relative superlative reading where EST is connected to the adnominal adjective *ʕaʕbe* ‘difficult’, but only a reading where *aktar* ‘most’ has an adverbial interpretation.

- (66) Hallman (2016), ex. 30a
 muna aktar waħd-e hall-it [DP masʔale ʕaʕbe]
 Mona most one-FS solved-3FS problem difficult
 = ‘Mona solved a difficult problem the most times.’
 ≠ ‘Mona solved the most difficult problem’ ()

As this language allows overt movement of EST (see (65)), in the hypothesis that quality relative superlatives rely on DP-external scope of EST it is not clear why we do not see overt movement of EST out of the DP in this case.

6. Conclusions

Zero-marked superlatives in Romance are subject to various restrictions: in prenominal position, they occupy the specifier of a dedicated projection, which is a scope position. This is why they disallow relative readings. In Romanian, where all superlatives have the overt marker *cel*, prenominal superlatives may sit in SpecDP, which explains why they can have relative readings. In Italian and Ibero-Romance (as opposed to Romanian and French), zero-marked superlatives are also found in reduced relatives selected by a definite D (see postnominal superlatives), with quantity adjectives and in DP-external positions. In the latter two cases, they are licensed by an operator to which they raise at LF (normally a relative operator, but

clefts and interrogative operators may also serve as licensors, subject to speaker variation). Quantity zero-superlatives are subject to the same licensing conditions as DP-external superlatives because they can neither be licensed in SpecSupP (because they are necessarily relative) nor in a reduced relative.

The use of overt superlative marking for prenominal superlatives in Romanian, as opposed to the other Romance languages, is also correlated to the availability of combinations with determiners others than the definite D, in particular demonstratives and the indefinite article. Demonstratives are used anaphorically, to indicate that the entity picked up by the superlative is identical to an old discourse referent. Indefinites are used when the existence of an entity satisfying the superlative property is at stake, and for conceptual units that come with an implicit domain of comparison (involving a situation argument that can be existentially bound below D). In French, which lacks an overt marker for prenominal superlatives, combinations with other determiners are only possible with quasi-lexicalized conceptual units such as ‘greatest common divisor’. However, in postnominal position, in spite of the existence of overt markers (Ro. *cel*, Fr. *le*), the combination with indefinite determiners is disallowed, indicating that the reduced relative is selected by a definite D.

The Romance data we have examined support a syntactic account of the relative vs. absolute ambiguity. Nevertheless, they also show that the definite marking found with relative superlatives is not always part of the DegP, but can also be found on D. Definiteness marking on D is expected on the in-situ analyses of raising readings, but not on the raising analyses based on Heim (1999). I presented a possible solution to this problem, proposed in Dobrovie-Sorin & Giurgea (2023), which relies on the idea that the EST of relative superlatives acts itself as a quantificational determiner, occupying SpecDP at LF. This account explains definiteness marking by the fact that EST_{Rel} introduces Russellian definiteness (uniqueness without existential presupposition).

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