

# snippets

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*Superlatives and presupposition.*

Superlatives come with presuppositions. The sentence in (1), for instance, presupposes that John is a linguist Peter knows.

(1) John is the tallest linguist Peter knows.

Standard theories analyse the superlative morphology *-est* in (1) as expressing a ternary relation between *John*, *tall* and a set of alternatives: *the set of linguists Peter knows*. The sentence is true if John is taller than everyone in the set of alternatives (minus John himself). It moreover presupposes that John is among these particular linguists. This is based on the following schematic interpretation (cf. Heim 1999):

(2) *-est* (x)(P)(X) is true if and only if x is P-er than any other y in X

(3) *-est*(x)(P)(X) presupposes that x has property X

*Modals in the set of alternatives.*

Now consider:

(4) The fastest you are allowed to drive is 100km/h.

(5) The fastest you should drive is 100km/h.

There are two puzzling things about these examples: (i) they mean the same, despite the fact that the modals they include have different modal force and (ii) they have the same presupposition: both (4) and (5) indicate that 100km/h is a *permitted* speed. Crucially, (5) does not suggest that 100km/h is a speed you *should* drive at.

It is not unlikely that the explanation for the fact that (4) and (5) are synonymous should be sought in the fact that *should* is a neg-raising verb. Note first that (2) is equivalent to (6).

(6) *-est* (x)(P)(X) is true if and only if any y that is P-er than x is such that it is not the case that y is in X

If we now assume that the relative clause provides the set of alternatives, as in Howard 2013, then this yields the following sketch for an analysis of (4) and (5), where the scope of negation in (8) is lower than what is compositionally provided, in line with the neg-raising property of *should*.

(7) 100km/h is such that any faster speed is a speed you are not allowed to drive

(8) 100km/h is such that any faster speed is a speed you should not drive at

This sketch of course lacks an explanation of how the implicit negation in *-est* can come to be involved in neg-raising, but an account along these lines does predict that other neg-raising verbs yield similar readings, which seem accurate. (Take for example *the fastest John is supposed to drive.*)

The problem, however, is that a solution along the lines of (7) and (8) cannot possibly provide any solution to the second puzzle the data presented, namely that (4) and (5) have the same presupposition. The problem is that we have assumed that a structure *-est(x)(P)(X)* presupposes that *x* has the property described by *X*. But in (4), *X* is how fast you are *allowed* to drive, whilst in (5) *X* is how fast you *should* drive. We cannot appeal to neg-raising to solve this puzzle, since, crucially, negation is not a part of the presupposition.

### **References**

- Gajewski, J. (2005) *Neg-raising: Polarity and Presupposition*. PhD thesis, MIT.  
Heim, I. (1999) "Notes on superlatives." Lecture notes, MIT.  
Howard, E. (2013) "Superlative degree clauses: evidence from NPI licensing." Ms., MIT.