

## Core claims

Expressions of the shapes *at N's ADJest* (**individual superlative modifiers**) and *at the ADJest* (**alternative superlative modifiers**) are both semantically and syntactically distinct. I present a novel analysis of the semantics of the latter.

- at the fastest** is an alternatives-introducing Degree Phrase modifier (see e.g. Coppock 2016; I abstract away from intensionality in this case):

$$\llbracket \text{at the fastest} \rrbracket = \{ \lambda d. y_d \mid y \in C \wedge \forall x'_d \in C. d \neq x' \rightarrow d > x' \wedge \partial(d \in \mathbf{Dom}(\mathbf{fast})) \wedge \partial(x' \in \mathbf{Dom}(\mathbf{fast})) \}$$
  
Takes a degree argument  $d$ , returns a set of alternatives in  $C$  of which  $d$  is the highest-ranked, presupposing  $d$  and its alternatives are on the scale of **fast**

- at Mary's fastest** is a locative PP that saturates the intensional argument slot of an expression (Deo et al. 2013)

$$\llbracket (\text{at}) \text{ Mary's fastest} \rrbracket = \iota i. \forall i'. i' \not\subseteq i \rightarrow \mathbf{max}(\lambda d. \mathbf{fast}(d)(\text{mary}(i))) > \mathbf{max}(\lambda d. \mathbf{fast}(d)(\text{mary}(i')))$$
  
The (maximal) interval at which Mary is faster than at any other interval

Alternative superlative modifiers are generally **interpreted epistemically**; individual superlative modifiers quantify (indirectly) over **stages of the possessor**

The superlative in individual superlative modifiers is nominalized: a relational noun (cf. Corver & Matushansky 2006)

## Characterizing individual superlative modifiers

- Some naturally occurring examples (all natural examples are prefixed with <sup>n</sup>):

- <sup>n</sup> <sub>[DP]</sub>Capitalism at its worst] is still much better than <sub>[DP]</sub>communism at its best]! (**DP-modifier**)
- <sup>n</sup> Austen <sub>[VP]</sub>is at her greatest] when she <sub>[VP]</sub>is at her most impersonal] ... (**primary predicative PP**)
- <sup>n</sup> 'Gaga: Five Foot Two' shows the star at her most vulnerable. (**depictive PP**)
- <sup>n</sup> At its tallest, the aqueduct reaches a height of 93.5 feet. (**Sentential modifier**)

- Individual superlative modifiers don't necessarily refer to temporal intervals**; (5) quantifies over spatial intervals (contra Corver & Matushansky 2006).
- They can even refer to subsets/parts of a plural possessor:

- <sup>n</sup> it's easy to forget that B.A.P are at their oldest twenty-five, and at their youngest just nineteen!

- In contrast, **alternative superlative modifiers cannot appear predicatively**, or in any sentence without a DegP:

- \* John is at the fastest now. (cf.  $\checkmark$  *John is at his fastest now.*)
- \* The room will fit this table at the longest. (from Coppock 2016; cf.  $\checkmark$  *The room will fit this table at its longest.*)

- Individual superlative modifiers measure stages of **the possessor** on the scale referred to by the superlative: it can't freely associate e.g. with focus or refer to events.

- John mostly likes rare animals. #At his most common, he likes sea turtles. (cf.  $\checkmark$  *The most common he likes is sea turtles.*)
- # Mary goes to the gym once a week at her rarest.

- Although it's not obvious, **the possessor does not need to be locally bound**; an independent DP can serve as the possessor (10), or the possessor can corefer with a prior discourse antecedent (11).

- <sup>n</sup> At the show's best, we see Veronica clearly as a flawed character even though she is also the viewer's moral guide.
- <sup>n</sup> Since the function of shame in society is to act as a sanction against violating important social norms, it leaves one feeling alone. At its worst you can feel totally isolated in your badness ...

- Rather than claiming that the possessor argument must be locally bound (Corver & Matushansky 2006), I assume that a particular pragmatic relationship must hold.
- In particular, there seems to be a strong **inference of relevance or causality**: in (11), it is *because* shame is at its worst that you feel isolated in your badness. In (10), it is because the show is at its best that we see Veronica as a flawed character.

## Evidence for intensionality: parallels with degree achievements

- Deo et al. (2013): **Degree-achievement** verbs receive different interpretations depending on the nature of the contextually determined intensional domain of the nominal (time, space, etc.)

Reading	Degree-achievement	Individual SM
<i>Spatial</i>	The road narrows at the end.	At its narrowest, the road is 1m across.
<i>Abstract</i>	The script weakens toward the end.	At its weakest, the plot plods.
<i>Kind</i>	When the economy flourishes, hemlines rise.	Hemlines are at their highest when the economy flourishes.
<i>Functional</i>	Fish ears grow with increased CO2.	Fish ears are at their longest with a concentration of 1500ppm.

- These different readings correspond to different types of intensional domains for the nominals. **Individual superlative modifiers are intensionally sensitive**: their meaning depends on the identity of the domain.
- The domain must be linearly ordered** (i.e., an axis, see Gawron 2009). E.g. on the spatial interpretation, the domain is a linearly ordered set of spatial points at which the width of the road is measured.
  - I use  $i$  as a variable for for domain types; in practice, this will be resolved by linguistic or pragmatic context, and different domains have different semantic types. (e.g.  $\tau$  for times,  $\sigma$  for spatial points,  $e$  for entities.)

## A semantics for individual superlative modifiers

- Derivation of *at John's fastest*; the -'s is semantically vacuous, as the nominalized *fastest* is a relational noun (Barker 2011, Peters and Westerstahl 2013).

