

# Bare superlatives and relative clauses in Dutch\*

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τῇ καλλίστῃ

I will study bare superlatives that combine with relative clauses. Plan:

- section 1: introduction to bare superlatives without relative clauses: two types;
- section 2: data on bare superlatives with relative clauses: new puzzles;
- section 3: a proposal for how the relative clause relates to the superlative, and where the different readings come from.

## 1 Two types of bare superlatives

Before I turn to superlatives, a bit of background on grammatical gender in Dutch and the *-e* suffix.

### Background 1: grammatical gender and *-e* suffix in Dutch

- Dutch has two grammatical genders: common and neuter. The definite determiner agrees with its complement noun: *de* for common nouns, and *het* for neuter nouns.
- Attributive adjectives get an agreement suffix *-e* in all cases except when the corresponding noun phrase is [+singular, –definite, neuter]:

- (1) a. een mooi-\*(e) huis,      het mooi-\*(e) huis,  
      a beautiful-(\*AGR) house(N), the.N beautiful-AGR house(N),  
  
      de mooi-\*(e) huizen  
      the.PL beautiful-AGR houses
- b. een mooi-\*(e) vrouw,      de mooi-\*(e) vrouw,  
      a pretty-AGR woman(C), the pretty-AGR woman(C),  
  
      de mooi-\*(e) vrouwen  
      the.PL pretty-AGR women

Predicative adjectives never get agreement, and are always unmarked:

- (2) {dit huis / deze vrouw} is mooi-\*(e)  
      this.N house(N) / this.C woman(C) is beautiful-(\*AGR)

- We also find the *-e* on adjectives in NP ellipsis cases, as in (3).

\*Thanks to Norbert Corver and Marjo van Koppen for very useful discussion.

- (3) Ik wil een rod-\*(e).  
 I want a red-E  
 ‘I want a red one’

Corver and van Koppen (2011) argue that the *-e* seen in NP-ellipsis cases is not an inflectional affix as in (1), but a phonologically weak NP pro-form, similar to English *one*. As such, it is an instantiation of the pronominalization strategy of ellipsis.

Following Matushansky (2008) and Broekhuis (2013), I distinguish between two types of bare superlatives, which I will neutrally refer to as Type 1 and Type 2.

### 1.1 Type 1 and type 2: form

**Type 1.** Superlatives with an elided NP (called ‘attributively used superlatives’ in Broekhuis 2013)

- (4) Deze stoel is de kleinst-\*(e) stoel.  
 this.C chair(C) is the.C smallest-E  
 ‘This chair is the smallest (chair)’

- There is agreement between the determiner and the elided noun (*de<sub>C</sub> en stoel<sub>C</sub>* in (4)).
- The *-e* suffix is obligatorily present, suggesting NP ellipsis.

**Type 2.** Bare superlatives with *het* (called ‘predicatively used superlatives’ in Broekhuis 2013)

- (5) Deze stoel is het kleinst(e).  
 this.C chair.C is the.N smallest(E)  
 ‘This chair is the smallest (thing)’ OR ‘This chair is the smallest (chair)’

- Always neuter determiner, even with C-nouns like *stoel* in (5).
- The presence of the suffix *-e* is optional.
- The gender mismatch in (5) indicates there is no ellipsis of the precopular NP *stoel*. This view is also supported by the contrast between (6a) and (6b):

- (6) Welke stoel wil je? / Which chair do you want?  
 a. ✓ De kleinste stoel. ‘The smallest one’ [Type 1]  
 b. \*Het kleinst(e). [unavailable even though (5) is fine] [Type 2]

- The two types of superlatives take the same form when a neuter head noun is used (this is pointed out a number of times in Broekhuis 2013: 209,247,248). This is because *het* is always used in Type 2, but also as the agreeing determiner with neuter nouns in Type 1:

- (7) Dit boek is het kleinst(e). [Type 1/2]  
 this.N book(N) is the.N smallest-E

A minimal variant of (6) indicates that the *-e* suffix is required in Type 1 cases:

- (8) a. Welk boek<sub>N</sub> wil je? / Which book do you want?  
 Het grootst\*(e). [Type 1]  
 the.N big-est-E  
 ‘The biggest one’  
 b. (compare: ✓Dit boek is het grootst)

However, there is a difference in interpretation between Type 1 and Type 2, to which I turn now.

## 1.2 Type 1 and type 2: interpretation

The main difference in interpretation lies in the distinction between two readings, that I will refer to as the **anaphoric** and the **generic** reading.

Declarative copular sentences (the NP is the Adj-est)

- The basic example (4), repeated below, indicates that Type 1 bare superlatives have an anaphoric reading:

- (9) Deze stoel is de kleinste. [Type 1] (= (4))  
 this chair is the smallest  
 ‘This chair is the smallest (chair)’

That Type 1 bare superlatives have an anaphoric reading is further shown by the contrast of the fragment answers in (6): the elided noun determines the domain of quantification of the superlative.

- The case of (5) is more complicated, because when uttered in isolation it gets the same reading as (9): ‘this chair is the smallest chair’. However, in a suitable context a different reading appears:

- (10) Wat is het duurste wat je bezit? / What is the most expensive thing you own?  
 a. Deze stoel is het duurst(e). [Type 2]  
 this chair is the.N expensive-est(-E)  
 ‘This chair is the most expensive (thing).’  
 b. #Deze stoel is de duurste. [Type 1]

(10a) is interpreted as ‘this chair is the most expensive **thing**’. I call this the ‘generic reading’. Crucially, the Type 1 bare superlative in (10b) does not have this reading.

- I assume that the ‘anaphoric’-like reading of (5) in isolation is in fact a restriction of the generic reading due to contextual domain restriction by the precopular NP *stoel* (cf. cases such as “This chair is small”, where ‘chair’ provides the class of comparison for the adjective).

In (10), the leading question overrides this effect, and allows for the true generic reading.

In questions

- The generic reading of Type 2 bare superlatives is supported by the observation that they can be used in a discourse-initial position with *what*-questions, unlike Type 1:<sup>1</sup>

(11) [out of the blue, in a room of objects]

a. #Wat is hier de duurste? [Type 1]  
 what is here the expensive-est-E

⇒ this would lead to a response like ‘the most expensive WHAT are you talking about?’

b. Wat is hier het duurst(e)? [Type 2]  
 what is here the expensive-est(-E)

‘What’s the most expensive thing here?’

(This contrast is even more clear in the cases with relative clauses to be discussed below, see (16))

#### Interim summary

Type 1:	N <sub>C, i</sub>	... is de	Adj-est-	pro <sub>i</sub> (= -e)	} anaphoric reading
	N <sub>N, i</sub>	... is het	Adj-est-	pro <sub>i</sub> (= -e)	
Type 2:		... is het	Adj-est-(e)	?	generic reading

## 2 Bare superlatives with relative clauses

Matushansky and Broekhuis do not consider cases in which the bare superlative is modified by a relative clause, as in (12):

(12) Deze stoel is de duurst-\*(e) die ik heb. [Type 1]  
 this chair.C is the most.expensive-E that I have  
 ‘This chair is the most expensive one I have’

A number of things are different in this case, but before considering the full paradigm, a bit of background on Dutch relative clauses.

#### Background 2: D/W-series and relative clauses

- Dutch has two sets of pronominal elements: the *d*-series (common *die*, neuter *dat*) and the *w*-series (*wie*, *wat*) (see e.g. van der Horst 1988; Hoekstra 1992; van Kampen 2007; Barbiers et al. 2010: §2.4; Sportiche 2011; Boef 2012).
- The *d*-series function as demonstratives and regular relative pronouns. The *w*-series are, among other things, used as *wh*-words (for *who* and *what*, respectively) and occur in

<sup>1</sup> *Who*-questions are different from *what*-questions. The restriction to persons in *who*-questions is apparently enough to license the anaphoric reading out of the blue:

- (i) Wie is hier de slimste / de beste?  
 who is here the smartest-E / the best-E  
 ‘Who here is the smartest/best (person)?’

certain headed relative clauses, such as with indefinites (*iets* ‘something’), negative quantifiers (*niets* ‘nothing’), demonstratives (*dat* ‘that’), and of course *alles*.

- (13) a. Wat Linda zegt is belangrijk. [pseudocleft]  
           what Linda says is important  
       b. Ik doe wat Jan doet. [free relative]  
           I do what John does  
       c. Ik heb {iets, niets, dát} gevonden wat belangrijk is.  
           I have {something, nothing, that} found what important is  
           ‘I found {something, nothing, that} which is important’ [certain HRCs]

- The *w*-series are used as relative pronouns when embedded, and in obliques ([Sportiche 2011](#)):

- (14) a. de vrouw [die/\*wie] ik zag  
           the woman REL I saw  
       b. het boek [dat/?wat] ik las  
           the book REL I read  
       c. de jongen [met wie/\*die] ik praatte  
           the boy with REL I talked  
       d. het boek [waarover] hij sprak  
           the book about.REL he spoke  
       e. de plaats [waar/\*daar] ik was  
           the place REL I was

- [Sportiche \(2011\)](#): Dutch *w/d*-contrast bears similarities to the French *que/qui* distinction.
- The *d*-series are losing terrain to the *w*-series ([van der Horst 1988](#); [Severijnen 2013](#)). There is a certain prescriptive flavor to the question which headed relative clauses get *wat* and which ones get *dat*.

Here is the full paradigm:

(15) Declarative copular sentences

- a. Deze stoel is de duurst-\*(e) **die** ik heb. [C/C/Type 1]  
    this chair(C) is the.C most.expensive-E that I have  
    ‘This chair is the most expensive one I have’  
   b. Deze stoel is het duurst-\*(e) {**wat** / ?dat} ik heb. [C/N/Type 2]  
    this chair(C) is the.N most.expensive-E what / that I have  
    ‘This chair is the most expensive thing I have’

- c. Dit boek is het duurst-\*(e) {wat / dat} ik heb. [N/N/Type 1/2]  
 this book(N) is the.N most.expensive-E what / that I have  
 ‘This book is the most expensive thing/book I have’
- d. \*Dit boek is de duurste die ik heb. [N/C]  
 gender mismatch
- Many of the contrasts from section 1.2 are much clearer when a relative clause is present, presumably because it makes the domain of quantification explicit. For example, consider the following counterpart of (11):

(16) [out of the blue]

- a. #Wat is de duurste die je ooit gekocht hebt? [Type 1]  
 what is the expensive-est-E that you ever bought have?  
 ⇒ leads to a response like ‘the most expensive WHAT are you talking about?’
- b. Wat is het duurste wat je ooit gekocht hebt? [Type 2]  
 what is the expensive-est-E that you ever bought have?  
 ‘What is the most expensive thing you have ever bought?’
- Difference 1: the distribution of -e** In (15b) the agreement suffix *-e* is obligatory, but in the same sentence without a relative clause, (5), it is optional. The same holds for (15c) and (7).
  - Difference 2: readings and the relative pronoun** In (15c), repeated below, both pronouns are possible, but there is a difference in meaning. With *wat* we get the generic reading corresponding to Type 2, i.e. that this book is the smallest *thing* I have (17a). With *dat*, the reading is the anaphoric reading corresponding to Type 1: this book is the smallest *book* I have (17b).

- (17) a. Dit boek is het duurst-\*(e) wat ik heb.  
 this book(N) is the.N most.expensive-E what I have  
 ‘This book is the most expensive **thing** I have’ [generic reading / Type 2]
- b. Dit boek is het duurst-\*(e) dat ik heb.  
 this book(N) is the.N most.expensive-E that I have  
 ‘This book is the most expensive **one** (book) I have’ [anaphoric reading / Type 1]

- Further support for the association between the generic reading and *wat* comes from *which*-questions:

- (18) a. \*Welke stoel is het duurste wat je hebt? [Type 2]  
 which chair is the expensive-est-E what you have
- b. ✓ Welke stoel is het duurste?  
 ‘Which chair is the most expensive one?’
- c. Welke stoel is de duurste die je hebt? [Type 1]

*Welke stoel* ‘which chair’ restricts the question to chairs, and this is incompatible with the generic reading of Type 2, brought about by *wat* in (18a).

- As for (15b), *wat* again yields the generic reading, but *dat* is somewhat degraded, presumably because this would correspond to an anaphoric reading, but neuter *dat* mismatches with the common noun *stoel*. Finally, (15a) only has an anaphoric reading, and here the form *die* has to be used, which matches with the common gender determiner *de*.

#### Data summary

Type 1:	N <sub>C, i</sub> ...	de	Adj-est-	pro <sub>i</sub> (=e)	( <i>die</i> RC)	} anaphoric reading
	N <sub>N, i</sub> ...	het	Adj-est-	pro <sub>i</sub> (=e)	( <i>dat</i> RC)	
Type 2:		het	Adj-est-(e)	?	.	} generic reading
		het	Adj-est-e	?	<i>wat</i> RC	

obligatory                      optional

### 3 Some questions answered

#### 3.1 What does the relative clause modify?

- Relative clauses can be seen as one of several ways to modify superlatives. Other options include PPs such as *van*-phrases (see (23) below), and modal superlatives (“the biggest possible”, see [Romero 2012](#) and references there). This raises the question of how these modifying phrases relate to the (bare) superlative.
- What does the relative clause modify? Two options:

- (19) a. **Option A.** The relative clause modifies the superlative directly.  
 b. **Option B.** The relative clause modifies the elided NP / pro-form.

In informal semantic terms, the choice can be put as follows:

- (20)  $\text{-est}(x, R) = \exists d(R(x, d) \ \& \ \forall y[y \neq x \rightarrow \neg R(y, d)])$  ([Heim 1999](#))  
 “the most expensive chair that I have”

- a.  $\text{-est}(\text{chair}, \lambda x \lambda d.(x \text{ is } d\text{-expensive} \ \& \ \text{I have } x))$  (“discontinuous analysis”)  
 b.  $\text{-est}(\text{chair that I have}, \lambda x \lambda d.(x \text{ is } d\text{-expensive}))$

(see also [Keenan and Moss 2016: 116](#) for a note on an Option A-like discontinuous analysis for superlatives with RCs)

- In order to say something about (19), we consider an additional type of bare superlatives that Dutch has: “adverbial” bare superlatives (see [Matushansky 2008: §10.2](#) for more data and discussion).

- (21) Marie loopt het snelst(e).  
 Mary walks the fast-est-(E)  
 ‘Mary walks fastest (Mary is the fastest walker)’

- Importantly, no relative clause is possible with adverbial bare superlatives. This is shown in (22a), forming a minimal pair with (22b) in which the same word *snel* ‘fast’ is used as an adjective.

- (22) a. ??Marie loopt het snelst(e) {dat/wat} ik gezien heb.  
 Mary walks the fastest(E) that I seen have  
 intended: ‘of all the times I saw Mary walk, this was the fastest’
- b. Deze raceauto is het snelste wat ik ooit gezien heb. [Type 2]  
 this racing car(C) is the fastest-E what I ever seen have  
 ‘This racing car is the fastest thing I have ever seen’

This shows that the RC does not modify the bare superlative directly, otherwise (22a) would be fine, as it is semantically well-formed. It seems obvious that in the case of adverbial bare superlatives no NP pro-form or elided noun is involved.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, in order for a relative clause to attach to a bare superlative, there needs to be something “nominal”.

- I note that other modifying phrases, such as *van*-phrases, are fine with adverbial and nominal bare superlatives alike (*van*-phrases also serve as a domain restrictor, see also [Broekhuis 2013: §4.1.3](#)):

- (23) a. Deze stoel is het duurst(e) van alle die hier gemaakt worden.  
 this chair is the expensive-est-(E) of all that here made are  
 ‘This chair is the most expensive of the ones that are made here’
- b. Marie loopt het snelst van alle kinderen.  
 Mary walks the fastest of all children  
 ‘Mary walks fastest of all children (Mary is the fastest walker of all children)’

The contrast between (22) and (23), as well as the optionality of *-e* in (23a) but not in (17), suggests that RCs and *van*-phrases relate to (bare) superlatives in a structurally different way.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.2 What is the head of the relative clause?

- For Type 1 bare superlatives the situation is fairly straightforward. Following [Corver and van Koppen’s \(2011\)](#) assumption that the *-e* functions as a pro-form in NP-ellipsis situations, it is this suffix that serves as the head of the RC (if, alternatively, the elision strategy is assumed, the elided NP serves as head of the RC):

- (24) Deze stoel is de duurst- [<sub>CP</sub> [-e<sub>2</sub> die t<sub>2</sub>]<sub>1</sub> ik heb t<sub>1</sub>]. [Type 1]

<sup>2</sup>[Matushansky](#) admits that applying her null noun analysis to these adverbial cases is “clearly fraught with problems” (p. 74), but sees no alternative.

<sup>3</sup>As a side remark, I note that modal superlatives only appear to be possible as Type 1:

- (i) a. Deze stoel is de grootst mogelijk-(e). [Type 1]  
 this chair is the biggest possible  
 ‘This chair is the biggest possible (chair)’
- b. ??Deze stoel is het grootst mogelijk. [Type 2]



The presence of the pro-form readily explains the anaphoric reading seen with Type 1 bare superlatives. The relative pronoun *die* agrees with the head word *stoel* (*dat* with neuter head nouns, see (17b)).<sup>4</sup>

- For Type 2 bare superlatives, the situation is more complicated. A first option is to claim that the relative clause is headless, i.e. a free relative (Caponigro 2003). This has some initial plausibility because free relatives also get a type of generic interpretation:

(25) I ate [<sub>FR</sub> what Mary ate].     $\Rightarrow$     I ate [the thing(s) that Mary ate].

Also, Dutch free relatives use *wat* (or other *w*-series pronouns, see Caponigro 2003: 173ff). However, free relatives normally appear in argument positions, and can be substituted for definite DPs. This is not the case for the bare superlatives, which already have an overt definite determiner.

(26) Deze stoel is het duurste wat ik heb.  
 \*Deze stoel is het duurste [het ding dat ik heb]

- If it is a headed relative clause, what is the head? Is it again the *-e* suffix, as in (24)? Note that the *-e* can not be analyzed as a pro-form here, since it is not anaphoric to a previous NP (recall (11)/(16) showing that Type 2 bare superlatives are fine in discourse-initial position). There is no anaphoric reading, but a generic reading, which is not explained under an analysis of Type 2 parallel to (24). So the *-e* is something else (agreement *-e*, or something different).
- I have argued that the RC in Type 2 bare superlatives cannot be headless, and is not headed by *-e*. Therefore I propose there is a silent element THING that serves as the head of the relative clause and provides the generic reading. That brings us to another question:

### 3.3 *Where does the generic reading come from?*

- The generic reading seen with Type 2 bare superlatives cannot be related to the relative clause or the relative pronoun *wat* (this is what [Caponigro 2003](#): §2.4.2.2.4 assumes for free relatives), because we find the generic reading also in Type 2 cases without a relative clause (recall (10a)).
- For Type 2, I propose that there is an NP THING present.

(27) a. Deze stoel is het duurst-e [<sub>CP</sub> [THING<sub>2</sub> wat *t*<sub>2</sub>]<sub>1</sub> ik heb *t*<sub>1</sub>]. [Type 2, RC]  
 b. Deze stoel is het duurst-(e) THING. [Type 2, no RC]

THING is semantically an indefinite with a wide domain, but can be contextually restricted.

<sup>4</sup>One can compare other cases of RCs with elided head nouns (based on [Corver and van Koppen's \(2011\)](#) example (3b)):

(i) Linda heeft een wit konijn gekocht dat ze lief vindt, en Marie een zwarte *ONE* die ze  
Linda has a white rabbit(N) bought that she likes and Mary a black-E that she  
stom vindt.  
doesn't like

'Linda bought a white rabbit that she likes, and Mary a black one that she doesn't like'

Here *die* is used, which I prefer over *dat*, although the judgments are subtle.

- In (27), *wat* is selected as a relative pronoun. We know that *wat* is featurally least specified, because it is used in a variety of different functions (besides (13), also in indefinites, exclamatives, comparatives, ...), and underspecified for features such as definiteness and gender (see [Barbiers et al. 2010](#): §2.1 and [Boef 2012](#): §4.2 for further discussion). This makes *wat* the relative pronoun used in headed relative clauses with a number of semantically indefinite head nouns: indefinites (*iets* ‘something’, *niets* ‘nothing’), superlatives, *alles*, ... (see (13c)). I claim that *wat* is associated with the generic reading of Type 2 bare superlatives (as shown in (17)), because THING as a head noun fits in this list of semantically indefinite NPs.
- A dependency between the relative pronoun (*die/dat* vs. *wat*) and the head of the RC (roughly, indefinite vs. definite) is natural in a head raising analysis of RCs, as I have assumed in (24)/(27), because the RC head starts out as the complement of the relative pronoun.
- I do not have a full account of the distribution of *-e*, but I assume that *-e* co-occurs with the NP THING in (27). This gives the following overview:

Obligatory in Type 1 (RC or not):	there is NP ellipsis, <i>-e</i> instantiates pronominalization strategy (C&vK)
Optional in Type 2 without RC: <sup>5</sup>	<i>-e</i> co-occurs with <small>THING</small> , which is optionally present (no need to head RC)
Obligatory in Type 2 with RC:	<i>-e</i> co-occurs with <small>THING</small> , which serves as head of the RC
Optional in adverbial cases: <sup>6</sup>	there is no NP ellipsis, this is the agreement <i>-e</i> , or something else (?)

Table 1. Distribution of *-e* with bare superlatives

- Earlier proposal [Matushansky \(2008: 73\)](#) writes the following about the distribution of *-e*:

“the null noun in predicate superlative phrases with a neuter definite article falls into the group of neuter nouns in Dutch that fail to trigger the appearance of the attributive inflection for definiteness”

She refers to a class of nouns that do not have *-e* in case where you would expect it (e.g. *het medisch dossier*). But I have argued there is no null noun in Type 2 bare superlatives.

## 4 Conclusions and future work

### 4.1 Main points

- Not all bare superlatives are the same, contra [Matushansky \(2008\)](#).
- Relative clauses need a nominal host, in the case of bare superlatives either pro-form *-e* or THING, but can’t combine with adverbial bare superlatives.
- The *wat/dat* distinction correlates with the generic/anaphoric reading distinction, but the generic reading is not brought about by *wat* (contra [Caponigro 2003](#)).

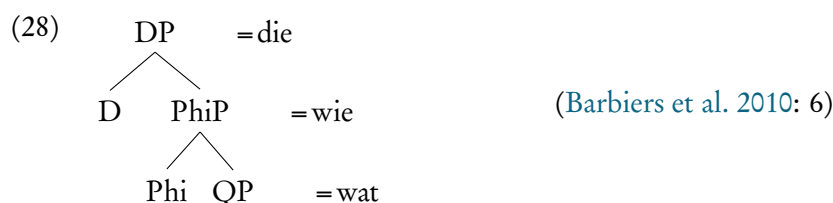
<sup>5</sup>[Matushansky \(2008: 73\)](#) gives the variant without *-e* a single question mark. For me that is fine, but we know there is a lot of variation between speakers ([Corver and van Koppen 2011](#)).

<sup>6</sup>There are other types of adverbial bare superlatives with other patterns of *-e* suffixation (e.g. *op z’n snelst(\*e)*, which has an interpretation like that of a modal superlative). I don’t consider them here, see examples (122), (123) in [Matushansky \(2008\)](#).

## 4.2 Future work

- A number of details of the proposed syntactic and semantic analysis need to be filled in. In particular I would like to:

- Relate my proposal to the phrasal analysis of pronouns:



- Provide a formal semantics of *THING*, and give a more general perspective (do we find it elsewhere?).
- Formulate a better semantic characterization of the class of head nouns that goes with relativizer *wat*. This task is made difficult by inter-speaker variation, language change, and the prescriptive flavor of the *wat-dat* distinction.
- There is a remaining puzzle about domain restriction: I argued that when (5) is uttered in isolation, the anaphoric-like reading is in fact the generic reading that gets restricted to the domain of chairs. However, when (15b) is uttered in isolation, you don't get such restriction, but the (full) generic reading instead. The modification by the relative clause plays a role here in how contextual domain restriction works.
- I would like to set up an experimental study to see if speakers get the distinction between the generic and anaphoric readings of bare superlatives, and the connection with the *wat* vs. *dat* distinction. Experimental work is relevant here because it can place the data against a background of inter-speaker variation in this domain, as well as the tendency that *wat* is used instead of *dat* in ordinary RCs.

Some preliminary corpus studies I conducted find that, for example, '*alles dat*' is still very uncommon, also in spoken language. See Table 2.

	ALLES		ENIGE		BESTE	
(de) ... die	45	0.16%	6433	36.85%	446	25.59%
(het) ... dat	793	2.82%	3025	17.33%	361	20.71%
(het) ... wat	27253	97.02%	7998	45.81%	936	53.7%
	<b>28091</b>		<b>17456</b>		<b>1743</b>	

Table 2. Occurrences in OpenSonar

Jan Odijk (p.c.) very kindly provided data on bare superlatives from GrETEL<sup>7</sup> that are relevant, but that I have not been able to include in this handout.

## Appendix A Some notes on *enige*

In Tellings (2020) I study *all*-clefts ('All John ate is a salad') in English. There is a number of parallels between *all*-clefts and the superlative data presented here.

<sup>7</sup>GrETEL: <http://gretel.ivdnt.org/ng/home>

- In Dutch, most *all*-clefts can equivalently be expressed as *het enige*-RCs, similar to English *the only thing*:

(29) **Alles** \*(**wat**) Jan gegeten heeft is een salade.  
 all what John eaten has is a salad  
 ‘All John ate is a salad’

(30) **Het enige wat** Jan gegeten heeft is een salade.  
 the only what John eaten has is a salad  
 ‘The only thing that John ate is a salad’

- *Enige* ‘only’ behaves just like the bare superlatives we have seen: it has the same Type 1/2 distinction, the same distinction between anaphoric and generic readings, and the same contrast between *dat* and *wat*.

- (31) a. Dat is de enige **die** ik nog heb. [Type 1]  
 that is the.c only that I still have  
 ‘That’s the only one I still have’ [requires some antecedent]
- b. Dit boek is het enige **dat** ik nog heb. [Type 1]  
 this book is the.N only that I still have  
 ‘This book is the only one (book) I still have’
- c. Dit boek is het enige **wat** ik nog heb. [Type 2]  
 this book is the.N only what I still have  
 ‘This book is the only **thing** I still have’ / ‘This book is all I still have’

- The same holds when *enige* is not modified by a relative clause:

- (32) a. Dat is de enige. [Type 1]  
 that is the.c only  
 ‘That’s the only one’ [requires some antecedent]
- b. Dat is het enige. [Type 2]  
 that is the.N only  
 ‘That’s the only thing’ / ‘That’s all’

- A further comparison with *all*-clefts will have to consider the behavior of *enige*/bare superlatives in argument position. In the domain of *all*-clefts, the distinction between predicative positions and argument positions is crucial for the smallness effect (see [Tellings 2020](#)). For *enige*/bare superlatives, it seems that they are somewhat degraded in argument position:

- (33) a. ??Ik heb het duurste gekocht.  
           I have the expensive.est-E bought  
           ‘I bought the most expensive thing’
- b. ??Ik heb het enige gekocht.  
           I have the expensive.est-E bought  
           ‘I bought the only thing’
- c. ?Ik heb het duurste wat ze hadden gekocht.  
           I have the expensive.est-E what they had bought  
           ‘I bought the most expensive thing’
- d. ?Ik heb het enige wat ze hadden gekocht.  
           I have the only-E what they had bought  
           ‘I bought the only thing they had’

Whether this is due to some syntactic restriction, or to a contextual constraint that something like “the most expensive thing” is too unspecified when used as an argument, is to be seen.

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