Superlative "*ever*": A cross-linguistic lexically anchored structural borrowing

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AG 3: Coexistence, competition, and change

Introduction

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- English *ever* is a common borrowing in its use to strengthen/ emphasize a superlative (emphatic superlative *ever*. ES-*ever*)
- Here: Dutch, German, French, Spanish
- Mainly data from an internet corpus
- Main question:
  How does ES-*ever* integrate into the matrix languages?

(1)   a.   nl: de beste opmerking *ever* 'the best comment ever'
  matrix language alternative: ooit *ever*

      b.   de: bestes Bild *ever* 'best picture ever'
  matrix language alternative: aller Zeiten 'of all times'

      c.   fr: la meilleure idée *ever* 'the best idea ever'
  matrix language alternative: de tous les temps 'of all times'

      d.   es: la mejor foto *ever* 'the best picture ever'
  matrix language alternative: de siempre 'of always'

Overview

Exploratory quantitative study

Method

- Timestamped JSI web corpora 2014–2021 (Kilgarriff et al., 2014)
- Same query for all corpora: *ever*, excluding *for/never/what/who ever*:
  `[word!="for|never|than|what|who"] [word="ever"]`
- Random sample of 300 hits
- Irrelevant examples (fully English sentences, movie titles, fixed expressions *happily ever after*, …)
- Classifying occurrences with emphatic superlative use:
  - ▸ Other English material within the *ever*-noun phrase?
  - ▸ For fr/es: relative order of adjective and noun
- Larger corpus:
  - ▸ Relative position of ES-*ever* within the noun phrase
  - ▸ Possible with noun phrases that have no superlative adjective?

Basic results

	# hits (per mil.words)	# ES-*ever*
nl	1,532 (0.95)	85 (28% of 300)
de	5,504 (0.65)	159 (53% of 300)
fr	2,550 (0.31)	18 (6% of 300)
es	1,638 (0.09)	35 (12% of 300)

- Big differences in frequencies between the Germanic and the Romance languages in the data.
- nl: highest overall occurrence of *ever*, but many different uses as larger English units.
- de: highest percentage of relevant hits in the samples. ES-*ever* maybe most prominent in de among the uses of *ever*.
- Relation between fr and es similar to that between nl and de: More uses of *ever* in fr, but higher percentage of ES-*ever* in es.

English elements in the noun phrase

	# English noun	# English adjective	# both English
nl	14 (16% of 85))	10 (29%)	7 (8%)
de	4 (3% of 159)	4 (3%)	3 (2%)
fr	2 (11% of 19)	5 (28%)	2 (11%)
es	10 (29% of 35)	10 (29%)	8 (23%)

(2) Examples from es:

    a. no Engl: la mejor risa *ever*   'the best laughter ever'

    b. Engl A: best comentario *ever* 'best comment ever'

    c. Engl N: los peores remakes *ever* 'the worst remakes ever'

    d. all Engl: el worst deal *ever*   'the worst deal ever'

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- All combinations possible in nl, de, fr, es
- Engl N: typically a loan word
- Engl superlative A: only with ES-*ever*!
  (no plain *cutest/coolest/worst N* in the corpora!)
- ES-*ever* combines with matrix superlatives and enables the use of English superlative forms.

Form of English adjectives

- fr/es: English loan adjectives occur only with synthetic superlative and in A-N order
- nl/de: analytic superlative also attested:

(3) de: das wohl *most awkward* und *most random* Kompliment *ever*

   'probably the most awkward and most random compliment ever'

- Stronger restriction on which English adjectives can be licensed in fr/es than in nl/de!

fr/es: Relative order of A and N

	A-N *ever*	N-A *ever*	overall N-A (vs. A-N)
fr	16 (89% of 18)	2 (11% of 18)	67%
es	24 (67% of 35)	11 (31% of 35)	65%

(4) a. es, A-N: la mejor canción *ever* 'the best song ever'

   b. es, N-A: las portadas más photoshopeadas *ever*

      'the most photoshoped portals ever'

- fr/es: A-N order less common, but possible (for some adjectives)
- A-N order with ES-*ever* more frequent than in fr/es in general
- Preference for A-N order and restriction on which adjectives can be used pre-nominally could be a language-internal reason for the frequency difference in the Germanic vs. Romance data.

Position of *ever*

- Always after the head noun,
- but allowing for other post-head elements in between

(5)   a.   nl: Beste <u>einde</u> [van een sinterklaasgedicht] *ever*!

           'best end of a Saint Nicholas poem ever'

      b.   nl: Mooiste <u>nieuws</u> *ever* [in deze coronatijd]

           'most beautiful news ever in this corona time'

(6)   a.   fr: le plus gros <u>démarrage</u> [de l'histoire des consoles] *ever*

           'the biggest boot in console history ever'

      b.   fr: le meilleur <u>couple</u> *ever* [de la série]

           'the best couple ever of the (tv) series'

Same positional possibilities as for other elements inside a noun phrase in the matrix language.

Position of *ever* (cont.)

- Additional position possible in English:

    (7) en: the biggest *ever* firework show

- Order "A *ever* N" not attested in our 300-hits samples
- One example found in the French corpus, …

(8) fr: je te   présente mon premier (et sûrement le   seul *ever*)
          I to.you present   my   first   and certainly the only ever
      tutoriel coiffure   !
      hairstyle tutorial

- …maybe *le seul* ever 'the only ever' is a parenthetical full noun phrase here?
- Prenominal serialization not possible for matrix language competitor. ES-*ever* just uses slots available in the matrix language noun phrase.

Morpho-syntactic superlative required?

	superlative	other
nl	85 (100% of 85)	0 (0% of 85)
de	159 (100% of 159)	0 (0% of 159)
fr	18 (100% of 18)	0 (0% of 18)
es	33 (94% of 30)	2 (6% of 35)

- Almost all cases in the 300-hits samples with morpho-syntactic superlative
- Other cases exist in English and in the considered matrix languages:

(9) a. en: my favorite game *ever*

   b. en: one of the top recruits *ever* at Arizona

(10) a. de: Und den ungeschlagenen Rekord *ever* hält ein Fußball-Profi!

   'unbeaten record ever'

   b. fr: l'un de mes jeux favoris *ever* 'one of my favorite games ever'

Morpho-syntactic superlative required?

- Occurrence with *top* in nl, de, fr (for es in esTenTen18)
- More fine-grained look at de: also with *absoluter Tiefpunkt* 'absolute low point', *Highlight*, and *Lieblings-N* 'favorite N'
- Same flexibility of matrix-language alternatives:

  (11)   a. nl: …zit Ronaldo nu in de <u>top</u> drie ooit

  'R. is now in the top 3 ever'

  b. de: mein Münchner Highlight *ever* 'my Munich highlight ever'

  c. fr: son chanteur <u>favori</u> de tous les temps

  'his/her favorite singer of all times'

  d. es: tus películas <u>favoritas</u> de todos los tiempos

  'your favorite movies of all times'

Semantic restriction to unique maximum, not superlative morphology in English and matrix languages.

Data summary

- ES-*ever* uses the same structure as the matrix-language alternatives
- ES-*ever* makes the uses of additional English adjectives possible
- "emphatic superlative markers" in English and in the matrix languages are not restricted to morpho-syntactic superlative

Why borrow ES-*ever*?

Other uses of English *ever*

- NPI: *Nobody has ever …*, *Did you ever …?*, *If you have ever …*
- Clausal superlative/comparative: *a better/ the best N* [*I have ever …*]
- Non-clausal degree: *as good as ever*, *better than ever*

- None of these attested with matrix lexical material in our 300-hits samples!!
- But: occasional occurrence of *denn/als ever* 'than ever' (de) in the overall corpus

(12)   a.   nl (2): ik ben meer ready dan *ever* 'I am more ready than ever.'
         b.   de (1): schlechter als *ever* 'worse than ever'

Only ES-*ever* is borrowed productively! (Androutsopoulos, 1998, 542)
(just as with *chicken* in German, Wiese (2021))

Why borrow ES-*ever*?

- No "need": ES-*ever* seems to be semantically and structurally equivalent to matrix-language alternative
- Bilingualism with Engl. common among users and in the domains (internet, entertainment, …)
- Matras (2011): "malfunction" (lapses in control over language selection)
- Field (2002), Matras (2011): stressed discourse particles high on borrowability scale
- Competition:
  - Shorter/structurally simpler than matrix language alternative (de,fr,es)
  - Additional meaning? (youth lang., entertainment domain, marker of high degree of excitement?)
- Why only borrow ES-*ever*?
  - ES-*ever* phonologically more salient than all other uses.
 - Stress on other non-clausal degree constructions: expected next extension – confirmed!

Formal analysis

Syntactic analysis: Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (Pollard & Sag, 1994)

- Same syntax as for other NP-internally extraposed degree phrases (van Eynde, 2007; Kay & Sag, 2012)

  (13) [[so willing to help out][that they called early]]

- Degree element puts *ever* on its EXTRA list

- superlative particle (*plus/más*), superlative morpheme (*-st-*), supletive superlative adjective   *eblings-*, *top-*)
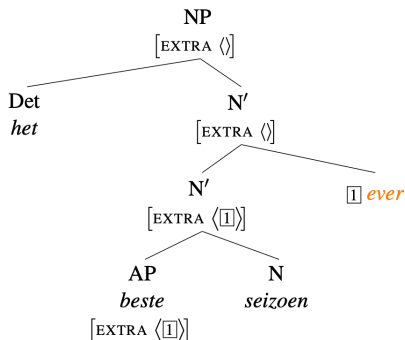
Modelling borrowing

- *Diasystematic Construction Grammar* (Höder, 2012, 2018)
  Communicative Situations (Wiese, 2021)
- Both: multilectal and multilingual language users have a single
  grammar, whose elements (words, constructions, rules, …) can be
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- Diasystematic CxG:
  - ▸ language user has a lexical entry of *ever*, marked for English (*idioconstruction*)
  - ▸ plus lexical entry marked for both English and the matrix language subgrammar (*diaconstruction*)

  Aspect of ES-*ever* being a borrowing from English is lost in the rather symmetric notion of a diaconstruction.

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- Comm-Sits:
  - Similar case (Wiese, 2021): In German, the (English) word *chicken* is used for chicken meat in diner contexts.
  - Analysis: lexical entry for the borrowed form that has this restricted semantics (and an adjusted phonology),
  - but marked as being associated with the English word *chicken*.

  It is not fully clear: How to integrate this link between the matrix language lexical entry and the English into the grammar?
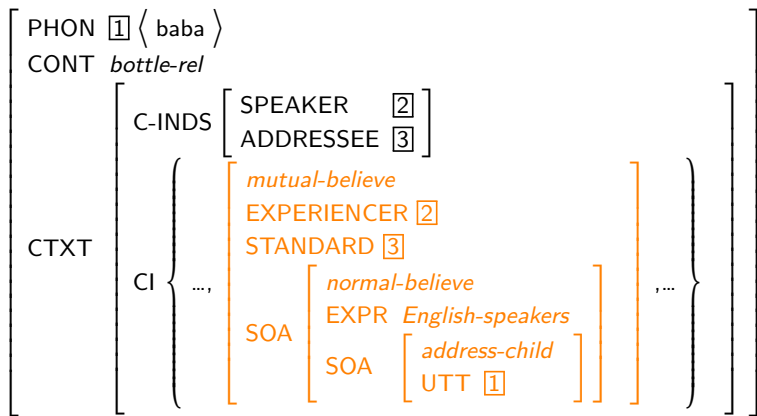
Formalization in Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG)

- No previous HPSG work on borrowing
- but integrating social meaning/register:
- Wilcock (1999); Bender (2005); Machicao y Priemer et al. (2022): Single register value per utterance, no way to mark individual elements as borrowings.
- Paolillo (2000); Asadpour et al. (2022): social meaning/ adequacy for particular situation types considered as *projective meaning* (conventionalized side messages) to be encoded as part of the CONTEXT feature (Green, 1994)

Social meaning in HPSG (Asadpour et al., 2022)

- Linguistic expressions can trigger social meaning inferences of the form proposed in Green (1994):

  (14) (X believes that) X and Y mutually believe that community Z normally believes that expression E signals ϕ.

- Such inferences encode *expressive meaning*/ are *conventional implicatures*.

- Evaluation for adequacy/consistency of expressed social meanings is a *particularized conversational implicature*.

Example: *baba* 'bottle' – child directed speech

$$
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{PHON} \; \boxed{1} \; \langle \; \text{baba} \; \rangle \\
\text{CONT} \; \textit{bottle-rel} \\
\text{CTXT} \begin{bmatrix}
\text{C-INDS} \begin{bmatrix} \text{SPEAKER} & \boxed{2} \\ \text{ADDRESSEE} & \boxed{3} \end{bmatrix} \\
\text{CI} \left\{ \ldots, \begin{bmatrix}
\textit{mutual-believe} \\
\text{EXPERIENCER} \; \boxed{2} \\
\text{STANDARD} \; \boxed{3} \\
\text{SOA} \begin{bmatrix}
\textit{normal-believe} \\
\text{EXPR} \; \textit{English-speakers} \\
\text{SOA} \begin{bmatrix} \textit{address-child} \\ \text{UTT} \; \boxed{1} \end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
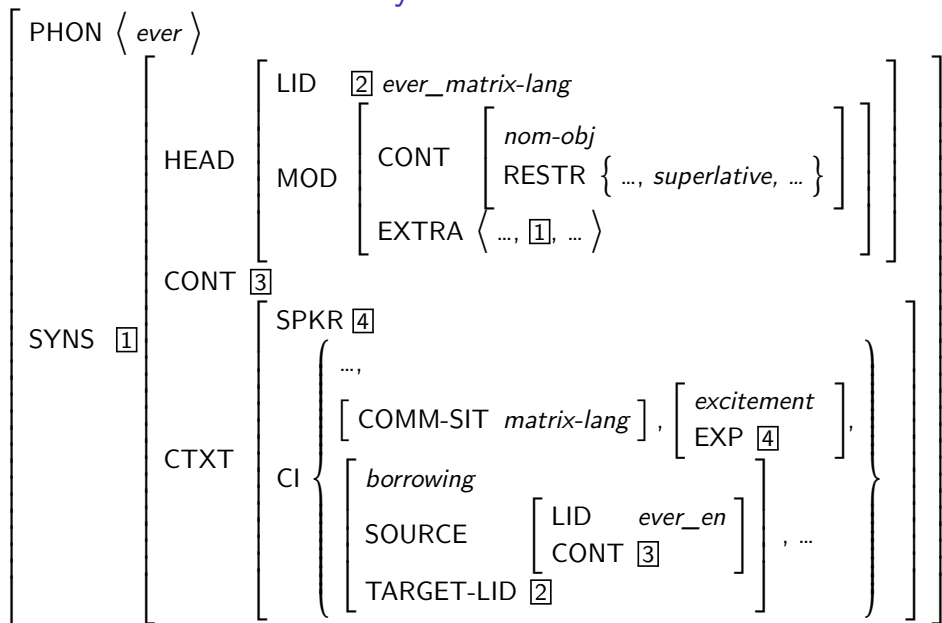\end{bmatrix}, \ldots \right\}
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
$$

By using the word *baba* in the meaning of 'bottle', speaker and addressee mutually believe that the English speech community normally believes that the word is used while talking to a child.

Wiese's system: $\begin{bmatrix} \text{COMM-SIT} \; \textit{address-child} \end{bmatrix}$

Including borrowing

- Situation for ES-*ever* is analogous to that of borrowed *chicken* in German (Wiese, 2021): The word is used in one particular use
  - *chicken*: mass noun in diner context
  - *ever*: emphatic superlative in high-excitement situation.
- Lexeme marking: LID
- English *ever*: $\left[\; \text{LID} \;\; ever\_en \;\right]$
- Loan-*ever* : $\left[\; \text{LID} \;\; ever\_matrix\text{-}lang \;\right]$
- Borrowing inference: (X believes that) X and Y mutually believe that the expression with LID value *ever_nl* is a borrowing of the expression with LID value *ever_en*
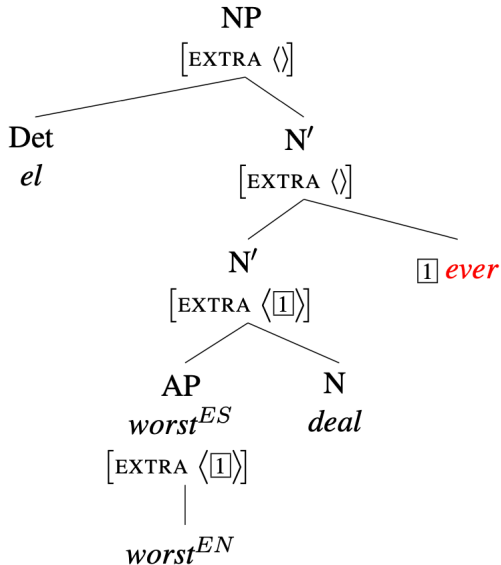
Sketch of the lexical entry of borrowed ES-*ever*

$$
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{PHON } \langle \textit{ever} \rangle \\[2ex]
\text{SYNS } \boxed{1} \begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD} \begin{bmatrix}
\text{LID} \quad \boxed{2} \; \textit{ever\_matrix-lang} \\[2ex]
\text{MOD} \begin{bmatrix}
\text{CONT} \begin{bmatrix} \textit{nom-obj} \\ \text{RESTR } \{ \ldots, \textit{superlative}, \ldots \} \end{bmatrix} \\[2ex]
\text{EXTRA } \langle \ldots, \boxed{1}, \ldots \rangle
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix} \\[4ex]
\text{CONT } \boxed{3} \\[2ex]
\text{CTXT} \begin{bmatrix}
\text{SPKR } \boxed{4} \\[2ex]
\text{CI} \left\{ \begin{array}{l}
\ldots, \\[1ex]
\begin{bmatrix} \text{COMM-SIT} \; \textit{matrix-lang} \end{bmatrix}, \begin{bmatrix} \textit{excitement} \\ \text{EXP} \; \boxed{4} \end{bmatrix}, \\[2ex]
\begin{bmatrix} \textit{borrowing} \\ \text{SOURCE} \begin{bmatrix} \text{LID} \quad \textit{ever\_en} \\ \text{CONT} \; \boxed{3} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{TARGET-LID} \; \boxed{2} \end{bmatrix}, \ldots
\end{array} \right\}
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix}
$$

Licensing English adjectives

- Lexical rule
- Input: Superlative form of an English adjective
    - fr/es: restriction to synthetic superlative ($\left[\ \text{MARKING } \textit{none}\ \right]$)
- Output: Matrix-language element with ES-*ever* on its EXTRA list.

$$(15) \begin{bmatrix} \text{HEAD} & \begin{bmatrix} \textit{adj} \\ \text{A-FORM } \textit{superlative} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{MARKING } \textit{(none)} \\ \text{CTXT} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{CI} \left\{ ..., \boxed{2}\begin{bmatrix} \text{COMM-SIT } \textit{en} \end{bmatrix}, ... \right\} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$$

$$\mapsto \begin{bmatrix} \text{CTXT} & \boxed{1} \cup \left\{ \begin{bmatrix} \text{COMM-SIT } \textit{matrix-lang} \end{bmatrix} \right\} \setminus \left\{ \boxed{2} \right\} \\ \text{EXTRA} & \left\langle \begin{bmatrix} \text{LID } \textit{ever\_matrix-lang} \end{bmatrix} \right\rangle \end{bmatrix}$$

el worst deal ever   'the worst deal ever'

Conclusion

Conclusion

- English *ever* is borrowed in one use, as ES-*ever*, …
- …and integrated into the standard matrix-language degree phrase constructions. (matrix language effects output)
- ES-*ever* enables the use of English adjectives that otherwise don't occur in the matrix language. (allows and limits creativity)
- Expected next step: use in other non-clausal degree constructions
- Difference between languages?
  - adjective-noun order (language internal)
  - level of English proficiency? (language external)
    (Intended: comparision of subcorpora by country)
- Why is ES-*ever* borrowed into so many languages?

Thank you!

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