

# Superlative “ever”: A cross-linguistic lexically anchored structural borrowing

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# Introduction

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English *ever* is a common borrowing in its use to strengthen/ emphasize a superlative (emphatic superlative *ever*. ES-*ever*)

- (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'

# Introduction

**Main question:** How does ES-*ever* integrate into the matrix languages distributionally and in their grammar?

- Dutch, German, French, Spanish corpus data show that the distribution of ES-*ever* depends on matrix language noun-adjective order
- We will present an HPSG-type analysis that models borrowing of ES-*ever* as a 3 stage process, from construction borrowing to lexical nativization.

# Overview

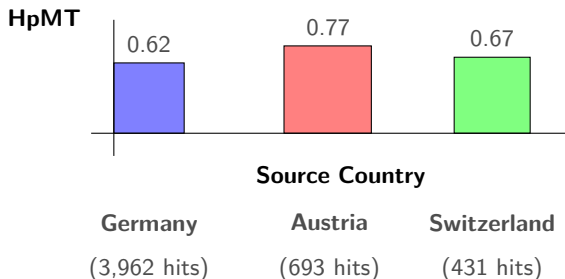
- 1 Introduction
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- 3 Why borrow ES-*ever*?
- 4 Formal analysis
- 5 Conclusion

# Exploratory quantitative study

# Method

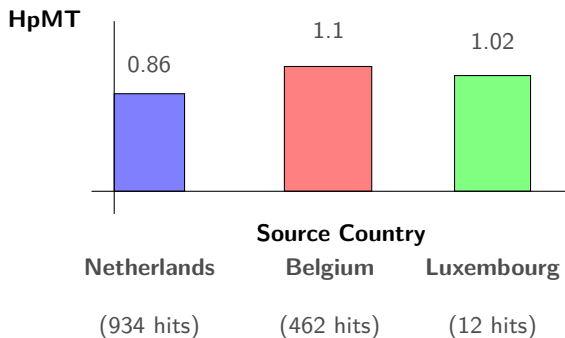
- Timestamped JSI web corpora 2014–2021 (Kilgarriff et al., 2014)
- Same query for all corpora: *ever*, excluding *for/never/what/who ever*:  
[word!="for|never|than|what|who"] [word="ever"]
- Random sample of 300 hits
- Irrelevant examples (fully English sentences, movie titles, fixed expressions *happily 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: Relative frequency per source country (German corpus) in Hits per Million Tokens (HpMT)

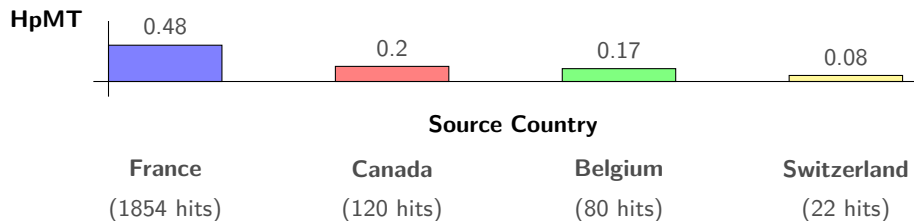




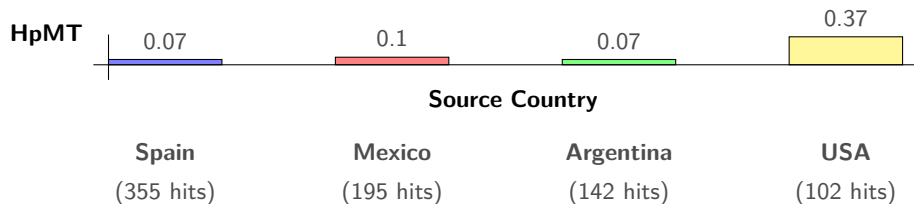
## Basic results: Relative frequency per source country (Dutch corpus) in Hits per Million Tokens (HpMT)



## Basic results: Relative frequency per source country (French corpus) in Hits per Million Tokens (HpMT)



## Basic results: Relative frequency per source country (Spanish corpus) in Hits per Million Tokens (HpMT)



## Basic results: Relative Frequency

- **Language family** is a good predictor for general (“macro”) frequency: Germanic languages exhibit greater frequencies than Romance languages. Yet no prediction for (“micro”) differences within one corpus.
- **Proficiency in English** (According to EPI) seems to be an insufficient predictor:
  - ▶ Austrians are more proficient (628 | 0.77) than Germans (613|0.62). *Austrian ever* is more frequent than *German ever*.
  - ▶ However, Germans (613|0.62) are more proficient than Swiss (556|0.67), but *Swiss ever* is more frequent.
  - ▶ Belgians (579 | 0.17) are more proficient than French (541 | 0.48), however *French ever* is more frequent.

## Basic results: Relative Frequency

- **Germanic / Romance** language contact is also a bad predictor:
  - ▶ Swiss (0.08) in the French corpus show lower frequencies than the French do.
  - ▶ Belgians (0.17) in the French corpus show lower frequencies than the French do.

## Basic results

	# hits (per mil.words)	# ES- <i>ever</i>
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:

- no Engl: la mejor risa *ever* 'the best laughter ever'
- Engl A: *best* comentario *ever* 'best comment ever'
- Engl N: los peores *remakes* *ever* 'the worst remakes ever'
- all Engl: el *worst deal* *ever* 'the worst deal ever'

## English elements in the noun phrase

(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'

- 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 <i>ever</i>	N-A <i>ever</i>	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 einde [van een sinterklaasgedicht] *ever*!

'best end of a Saint Nicholas poem ever'

b. nl: Mooiste nieuws *ever* [in deze coronatijd]

'most beautiful news ever in this corona time'

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

'the biggest boot in console history ever'

b. fr: le meilleur couple *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 35)	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 top drie **ooit**  
'R. is now in the top 3 ever'
- b. de: mein Lieblings-Jazz-Song **aller Zeiten**  
'my favorite Jazz song ever'
- c. fr: son chanteur favori **de tous les temps**  
'his/her favorite singer of all times'
- d. es: tus películas favoritas **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 for German)

## Borrowing a word in just one use?

- Only ES-*ever* is borrowed productively! (Androutsopoulos, 1998, 542)
- Common in borrowing:
  - ▶ *chicken* (en → de, Wiese 2021): only as food item

(13) de: Chicken im Brot  
chicken in.the bread 'roll with chicken spread'

- ▶ *überhaupt* (de → nl, Fisseni 2009): only borrowed as a discourse particle, not as a negation intensifier

(14) nl: En wie ben jij ueberhaupt dat je dergelijke  
And who are you überhaupt that you such  
uitlatingen naar iemands hoofd slingert??  
utterances to/at somebody's head throw  
'And who are you anyway that you throw such utterances  
at somebody's head?'

## 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 of (English) ES-*ever*

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

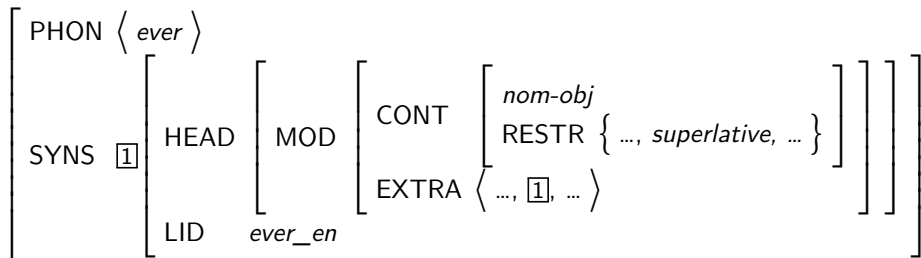
(15) en: [[so willing to help out][that they called early]]

Extraposition via EXTRA list

- Element with superlative meaning puts *ever* on its EXTRA list
  - ▶ superlative particle (*most*),
  - ▶ superlative morpheme (*-st*),
  - ▶ suppletive superlative adjective (*best*),
  - ▶ top-degree prefixoid (*top-*)
  - ▶ top-degree noun (*highlight*)

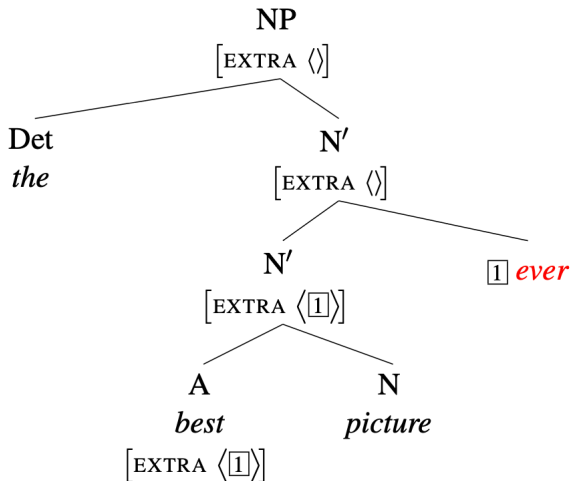
# English ES-*ever*

- Modifies some element with a superlative semantics, typically a superlative adjective.
- Must be on the EXTRA list of the element it modifies
- Ignored here:
  - ▶ semantics: domain widening
  - ▶ pragmatics: high excitement



(from here on: AVMs even more simplified)

en: *the best picture ever*



# Adjective order in HPSG

- English (Sadler & Arnold, 1994):
  - ▶ Prenominal adjectives do not allow for post-modifier or complements
  - ▶  $[N^0: A^0 N^0]$  vs.  $[N': N' AP]$
- French/Spanish (Abeillé & Godard, 2000):
  - ▶ Analysis analogous to Sadler & Arnold (1994)
  - ▶ Largely lexical difference between pre- and postnominal adjectives
  - ▶ Majority of adjectives: postnominal
- Dutch/German:  
All adjectives prenominal, even if phrasal:  $[N': AP N']$



## How does ES-*ever* integrate into the matrix language?

- Stage 1 (constructional borrowing): A.en N.en *ever*

(16) es: el *coolest job ever* 'the coolest job ever'

- Stage 2 (construction with just one en-element): A(P) N *ever*

(17) es: la mejor canción *ever* 'the best song ever'

- Stage 3 (lexical borrowing of *ever*):

- ▶ integration of *ever* into the matrix vocabulary (potentially with a marking as a borrowing)
- ▶ French, Spanish: N A *ever*

(18) es: las portadas más photoshopedas *ever*  
'the most photoshoped portals ever'

# 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 marked as to belonging to different varieties or lects.

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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.

# Modelling borrowing

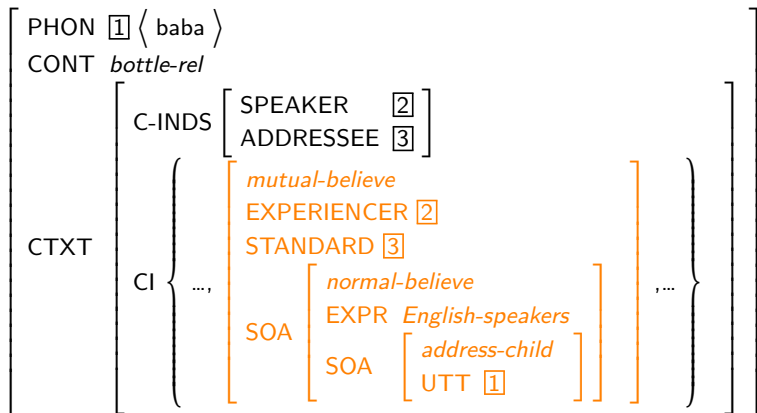
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- Comm-Sits:
  - ▶ Similar case (Wiese, 2021): In German, the (English) word *chicken* is used for chicken meat in diner contexts.
  - ▶ Analysis: lexical entry for the borrowed form that has this restricted semantics (and an adjusted phonology),
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

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): Register value per utterance, no explicit marking of individual elements as borrowing, but possibly modelling of overall effect.
- 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)

## Asadpour et al. (2022): *baba* 'bottle' – child directed speech



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.

# Grammars relativized to communicative situations

- Adaptation of Wiese (2021): [ COMM-SIT *address-child* ]
- Any part of an utterance can be marked for its conventionally-associated communicative situation(s)
- “Named languages” are valid values for communicative situations:
  - ▶ English-language element within a matrix language utterance:  
[ COMM-SIT *en* ]
  - ▶ Matrix-language element within a matrix language utterance:  
[ COMM-SIT *fr* ], ...(here: [ COMM-SIT *matrix\_lang* ])

## Including borrowing

- Listeme marking: LID (à la LISTEME in Richter & Sailer 2009)
- English *ever*: [ LID *ever\_en* ]
- Loan-*ever* : [ LID *ever\_matrix-lang* ]
- Loan-*ever* construction: [ LID *A-N-ever-cx* ]
- Borrowing inference: (X believes that) X and Y mutually believe that the target expression is a borrowing of the source expression.

$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{lex-borrowing} \\ \text{SOURCE } \textit{ever\_en} \\ \text{TARGET } \textit{ever\_matrix-lang} \end{array} \right]$$
$$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \textit{cx-borrowing} \\ \text{SOURCE } \textit{list(signs)} \\ \text{TARGET } \textit{A-N-ever-cx} \end{array} \right]$$



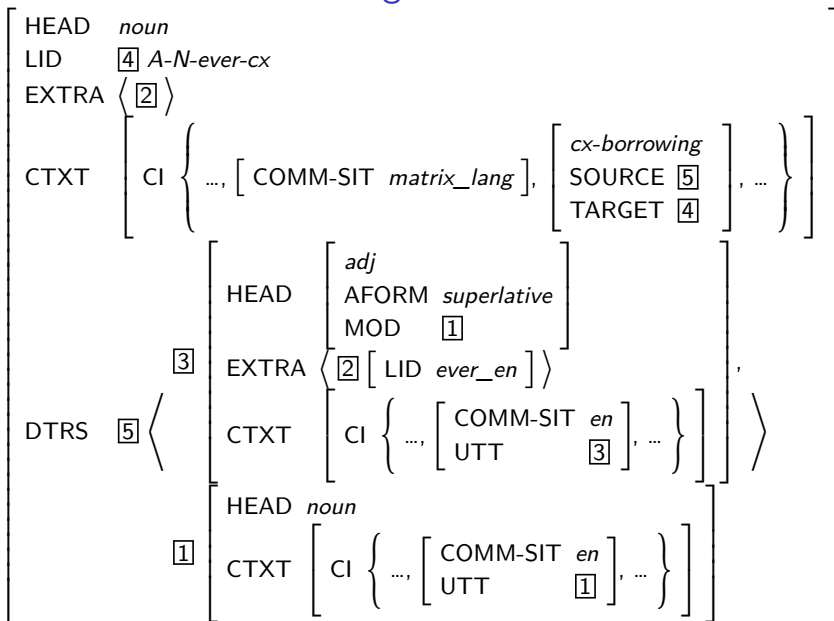
## Stage 1: Constructional borrowing

- English adjective noun + *ever*

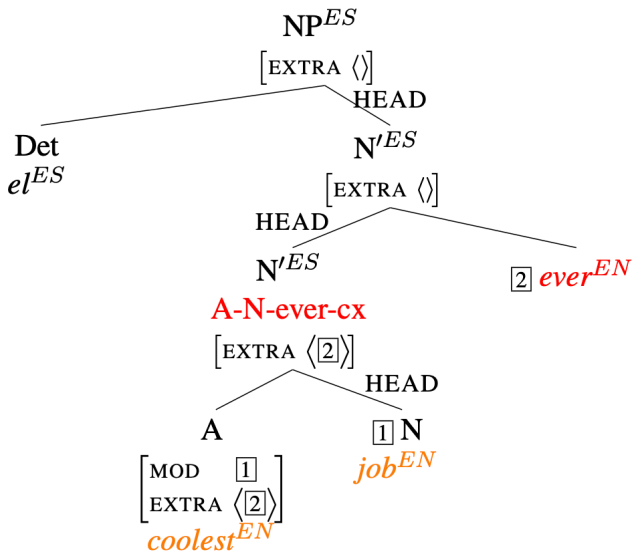
(19) es: Nuevamente se posiciona como el *coolest job ever*  
recently the positions as the coolest job ever  
'Recently, it positions itself as the coolest job ever.'

- Given the overall English proficiency of B2/C1, syntactic analyzability can be assumed
- Borrowing of an English, prenominal adjective that modifies an English noun and requires an extraposed ES-*ever*.

# Constructional borrowing

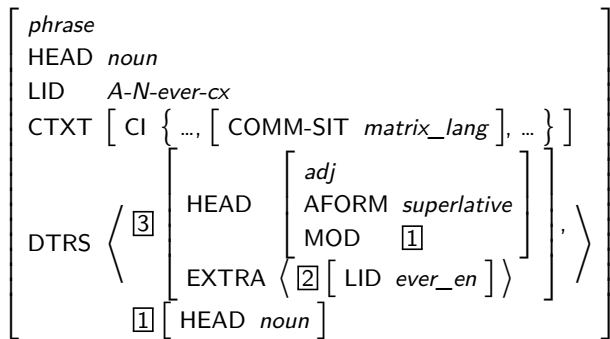


Stage 1: es: *el coolest job ever* 'the coolest job ever'

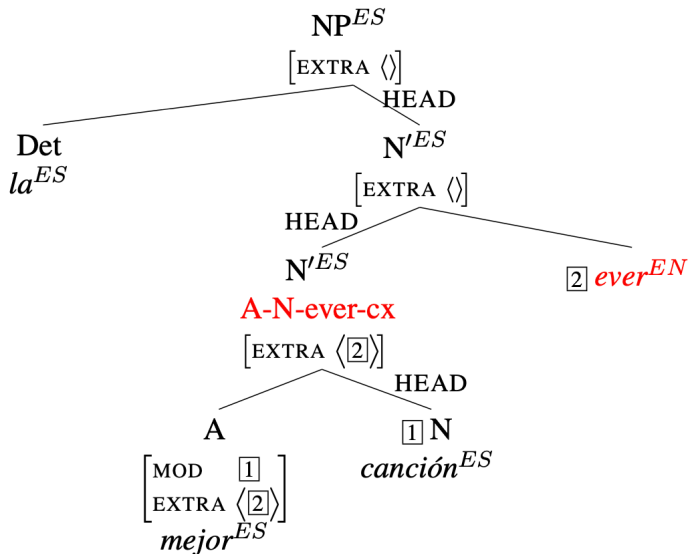


## Stage 2: es: *la mejor canción ever* 'the best song ever'

- The A-N-ever-cx is structurally parallel to matrix language A-N combinations
- It can be bleached with the only constuctional element remaining being *ever*
- The construction is no longer marked as a constructional borrowing, but as an construction containing an en-element obligatorilly.



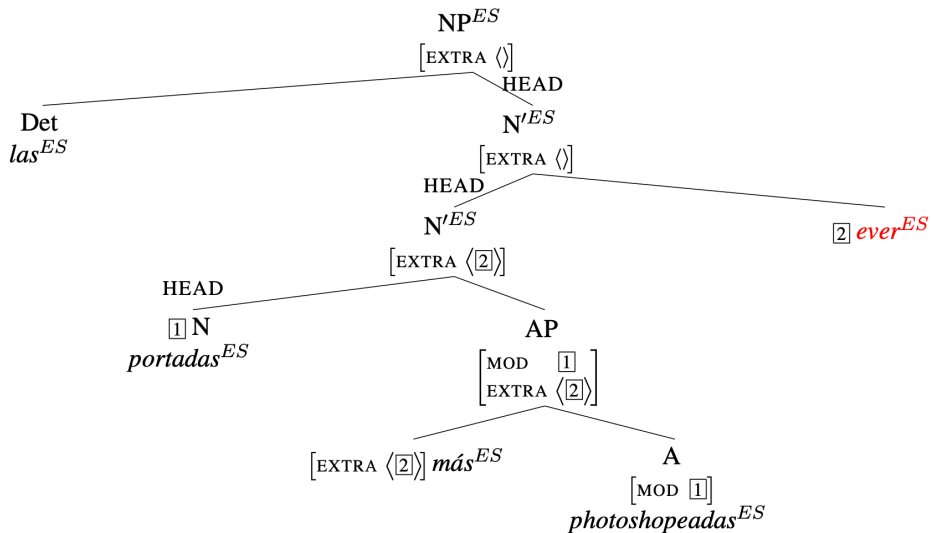
Stage 2: es: *la mejor canción ever* 'the best song ever'



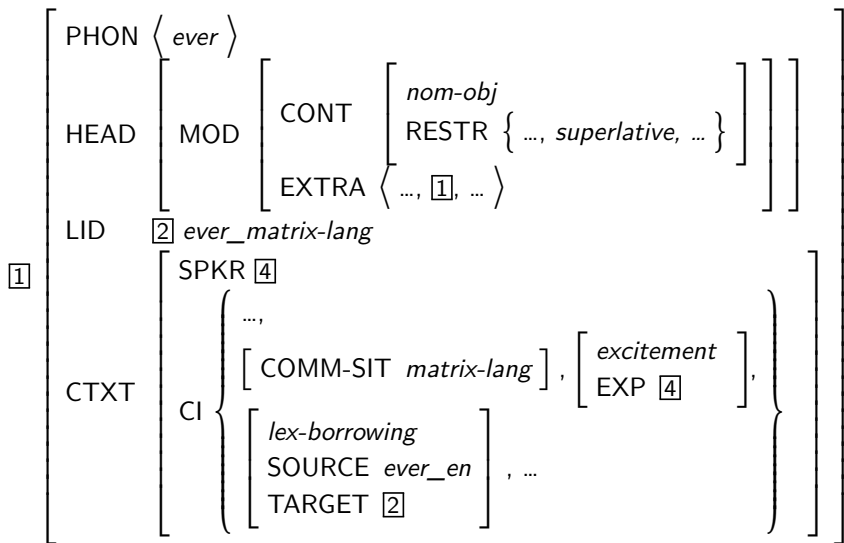
Stage 3: es: *las portadas más photoshopeadas* ever  
'the most photoshoped portals ever'

- *ever* is nativized and behaves like an ordinary superlative intensifier of the matrix language
- The is element can occur in other adjective-noun combinations, i.e., including both A-N and N-AP combinations

# Stage 3: es: *las portadas más photoshopeadas ever*



## Sketch of the lexical entry of borrowed ES-*ever*





# Differences between de/nl and es/fr

- Stage 1: same in all four languages
- Stage 2:
  - ▶ de/nl: possible with all adjectives
  - ▶ es/fr: only possible with prenominal adjectives
- Stage 3:
  - ▶ de/nl: no difference in the data to stage 2, but maybe in productivity
  - ▶ es/fr: also possible with postnominal adjectives

⇒ More versatility in the use of ES-*ever* in Dutch and German than in French and Spanish in Stage 2 already!

# Conclusion

# Conclusion

- Constructional borrowing:
  - ▶ English *ever* is borrowed in one use, as ES-*ever*,
  - ▶ ES-*ever* enables the use of English adjectives that otherwise don't occur in the matrix language.
- Lexical borrowing:  
*ever* is integrated into the standard matrix-language degree phrase constructions.
- Expected next step: use in other non-clausal degree constructions
- Difference between languages?
  - ▶ Language family as factor? (Romance vs. Germanic)
  - ▶ Adjective-noun order (language internal)  
(for ex. Croatian [A-N], Welsh [N-A])
  - ▶ Level of English proficiency (language external)?  
Not identifiable as factor in our data
- Why is ES-*ever* borrowed into so many languages?

# Thank you!

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