Superlative *ever* in Dutch, French, German, and Spanish

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1 Introduction   English *ever* has been borrowed into many languages in its emphatic superlative use (ES-*ever*). We will look at internet corpus data from Dutch, German, French, and Spanish, as in (1).

(1)   de beste opmerking ever 'the best comment ever' [nl] / bestes Bild ever 'best picture ever' [de] / la meilleure idée ever 'the best idea ever' [fr] / la mejor foto ever 'the best picture ever' [es]

We will first discuss the semantic and structural properties of the expression, identifying similarities and differences among the languages as well as in comparison to the expression in the donor language. We will then turn to its status as a borrowing. We will propose a modelling of ES-*ever* within a framework that takes *communicative situations* into account, such as Wiese (2021) and compatible proposals within HPSG (Paolillo, 2000; Asadpour et al., 2022).

2 Properties of ES-*ever*   The data reported in this paper are mainly from the Timestamped JSI corpora 2014-2021 for Dutch, German, French, and Spanish, accessed via sketchengine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). We used the same query for all four corpora to extract a subcorpus of ES-*ever* occurrences. From this, we extracted a ramdom sample of 300 hits from each of these corpora.[1] The first content column in Table 1 shows the number of hits of our query. As the corpora are of different size, we add the number of hits per million words. The next column indicates the number and percentage of relevant hits among the 300 hit samples. Non-relevant hits were mainly occurrences of *ever* in fully English sentences or in other combinations such as *happily ever after*. If no further indication of the source is given, the example is taken from that database. In all other cases, we indicate the source of the example.

In English, *ever* is considered a weak Negative Polarity Item (NPI), i.e., it occurs in negated sentences, questions, and also with superlatives. In addition, there are a few non-NPI uses (as in *happily ever after*). In all of the considered languages, the lexical item *ever* is borrowed in its emphatic superlative use, but not as a general NPI. Androutsopoulos (1998, 542) shows this for German with example (2).

(2)   * Würdest du ever …? 'Would you ever …?' [de, constructed]

Our four languages have native, i.e. matrix language, alternatives to *ever*, though not always the translation of NPI-*ever*, see Table 2. The standard superlative semantics, as in Heim (1999), assumes a universal quantification over the comparison class, i.e., *the tallest bridge* is a bridge of tallness d such that each (other) bridge in the comparison class is less tall. The explicit occurrence of universal expressions in many of the matrix language alternatives to *ever* reflects this. We are agnostic if a single lexical entry is possible for languages that use the same expression for universal and existential *ever* (English, Dutch, partially French and Spanish).[2] It is, however, clear that ES-*ever* has a universally quantified semantics. A further difference to NPI-*ever* is that ES-*ever* cannot occur in longer standard phrases in any of the languages, (3).

(3)   meilleure décision jamais (prise)/ ever (*prise)   [fr, frTenTen20; "*" form non-attested]
       best   decision ever   taken   ever taken   'best decision ever (made)'

In all four languages, we find mixed noun phrases with ES-*ever*, where part of the NP can be in English (see the last three colmns in Table 1). In (4) we list Spanish examples, underlining English items. For cases in which the English word is a noun, it is plausible that it is a loanword independently of this constructions.

(4)   a. no English: la mejor risa ever   'the best laughter ever' [es]
       b. English adjective: <u>best</u> comentario ever   'best comment ever' [es]
       c. English noun: 10 de los peores <u>remakes</u> ever   '10 of the worst remakes ever' [es]
       d. all English: el <u>worst</u> <u>deal</u> ever   'the worst deal ever' [es]

An important property of the construction is that English adjectives, as in (4b), do not seem to combine with the matrix language emphatic superlative marker. The relevant English adjectives (*cutest, coolest, worst*) do not occur with matrix language nouns outside the ES-*ever* construction in our corpora.[3]

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[1] Our query: `[word!="for|never|than|what|who"] [word="ever"]`

[2] Domain-widening as put forth in Kadmon & Landman (1993) is certainly a central meaning component of all uses of *ever*.

[3] We did not test this for *best* because of a high number of loan compound occurrences such as *best seller*. In the case of *worst*, there were just some occurrences of the loan compound *worst case scenario*. *Cool* can be used freely in the matrix languages, but, then, forms its superlative according to the matrix language patterns, i.e., *coolste* [nl, de], *plus cool* [fr], *más cool* [es].

ES-*ever* must be extraposed within the NP. Our corpora contain no relevant hits of the form "A *ever* N" (as in English *the biggest ever fireworks show* [en]). French and Spanish have both pre- and post-nominal adjectives. ES-*ever* is found in both types, see (5a). English loan adjectives can only occur pre-nominally, see (5c).

(5) a. las portadas más photoshopeadas ever   'the most photoshoped portals ever' [es]
     b. la mejor canción ever   'the best song ever' [es]
     c. <u>best</u> comentario ever / *comentario <u>best</u> ever   'best comment ever' [es]

In our 300 hits sample, 11 out of 35 relevant hits in the Spanish corpus had a post-nominal adjective, i.e. 31%. If we look at the overall distribution of adjective-noun orderings in the entire corpus, 64% of the adjectives are post-nominal. In other words, the ordering found with ES-*ever* goes against the trend in Spanish. This seems to be due to the fact that English has prenominal attributive adjectives.

In all structural respects, the AP modified by ES-*ever* behaves as expected in the matrix language. For example, English loan adjectives in this construction usually have a synthetic superlative. There are instances of analytic superlatives in the Dutch and German corpora, see (6), though none in the French and Spanish corpora.

(6) das wohl <u>most awkward</u> und <u>most random</u> Kompliment ever
                              'probably the most awkward and most random compliment ever' [de]

Our languages strongly associate *ever* with a morpho-syntactic superlative, we also find instances with purely semantic superlatives such as with the equivalent of *favorite*, such as *mein absolutes Lieblingsrace ever* 'my absolute favorite race ever' [de] and *l'un de mes jeux favoris ever* 'one of my favorite games ever' [fr]. In addition, we find combinations with *Top <number> ever* in the Dutch, German, and French corpora. The German corpus even contains the phrase *mein Münchener Highlight ever* 'my Munich highlight ever', whereas there is no instance of *highlight ever* in the corresponding English corpus.

The German and French corpora also contain individual examples with *only*, as in *le seul ever* 'the only (one) ever' [fr]. For English, *ever* is usually part of a post-nominal VP in the sequence *only N ever*, but there are examples like *the only movie ever, probably, that features Josh Brolin …* [en], in which *ever* might not to be an NPI inside a VP. This shows that ES-*ever* is not restricted to morpho-syntactic superlatives, but still to some semantic/pragmatic notion of superlative in the sense of an item exceeding relevant alternatives.

When the head noun takes a complement or a modifier, ES-*ever* can either precede or follow it in all four languages, while there is a preference in Dutch that *ever* follows complements and precedes modifiers. For French, we found complex NPs with complements on either side of *ever*, as in (8). This seems to be in line with the ordinary order of post-nominal constituents inside an NP in the matrix languages.

(7) a. Beste einde van een sinterklaasgedicht ever!   'best end of a Saint Nicholas poem ever' [nl]
     b. Mooiste nieuws ever in deze coronatijd   'most beautiful news ever in this corona time' [nl]

(8) a. le plus gros démarrage de l'histoire des consoles ever
                                                           'the biggest boot in console history ever' [fr]
     b. le meilleur couple ever de la série   'the best couple ever of the (tv) series' [fr]

We saw in Table 2 that Dutch uses the same word for the emphatic superlative expression as for a weak NPI. The other languages use an equivalent of *of all times*. In French and Spanish we also find an NPI form corresponding to *than ever*, see (9). In these cases, the adjective can be argued to be in the comparative form rather than in a superlative. This can be seen by the absence of a definite article and the choice of the comparison particle *que* instead of the particle *de*, the introducer of the comparison set for a superlative.

(9) Chris McSorley dit chaque année qu'il a une/*la meilleure équipe que jamais.
     'Chr. McS. says every year that he has a better team than ever.'
                                                           ([fr], *une* 'a' attested; *la* 'the' judged)

Table 1 shows that ES-*ever* is not equally common in the four considered corpora. If we extrapolate the percentages from the random samples, we arrive at the following estimates for the overall corpora: Dutch: 0.266 per million words (pmw); German: 0.345 pmw; French: 0.0200 pmw; Spanish: 0.011 pmw. This suggests a sharp divide between the two Germanic and the two Romance languages. A language-internal reason for this might be that Dutch and German have pre-nominal adjectives, just as English.

French and Spanish only allow a restricted set of adjectives in pre-nominal position. This makes French and Spanish NPs more different from English NPs, which might be a limiting factor for borrowing ES-*ever*. However, we saw in (5a) that the two languages allow for some post-nominal adjectives with *ever*.

A language external factor could be the proficiency of English as a foreign language in the countries from which the web sites in the corpora originate. This comes with the complication that French and Spanish are official languages in a number of countries. We have not looked at more regionally stratified data for the purpose of this abstract, but we hope to provide these data for the full paper.

To sum up, borrowed ES-*ever* is not an NPI, but behaves like its matrix language alternative. It can, however, license English adjectives (such as *best, coolest, cutest, worst*), which are otherwise not used freely in utterances of the matrix language.

3 Syntactic analysis Attibutive APs are treated in HPSG as modifiers, i.e., as phrases selecting a head that they combine with through a head feature, MOD (Pollard & Sag, 1994) or SELECT (Van Eynde, 2020). The superlative is, presumably, introduced through a derivational lexical rule (in the spirit of Sag et al. (2003)) which either manipulates the phonology of the positive adjective (for synthetic superlatives) or adds a superlative particle (such as *most* [en]/*plus* [fr]/*más* [es]), for analytic superlatives).[4]

The emphatic superlative expression construction is clearly related to other degree constructions that involve extrapostion from an AP, such as those discussed in Kay & Sag (2012a), see (10).

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

Van Eynde (2007) and Kay & Sag (2012b) assume that the extraposed clause in (10) is introduced by the degree particles, here *so*. An alternative to the extraposition view is presented in Kennedy & McNally (2005) for standard phrases for comparatives. They argue with examples like (11) that there can be some stacking of comparatives (Kennedy & McNally, 2005, 187).

(11)   Maverick's is more too dangerous to surf today than it was yesterday.

Stacking is also possible with *ever*, see (12). In the (introspectively judged) German example in (12b), *ever* cannot occur inside the clause that specifies the comparison class, but it can precede or follow that clause. In (12c), *ever* co-occurs with its matrix language equivalent *aller Zeiten*.

(12)   a.   …declaring the best books ever that you, meaning me, should buy and read, …   [en]

  b.   das ist [das beste Buch (ever), [das ich (*ever) gelesen habe], (ever)]!   [de, constructed]
       that is the best book ever   that I   ever   read   have ever

  c.   das wohl   mit Abstand hässlichste Affen-Arschgesicht aller Zeiten EVER   [de]
       the probably by far   most.ugly   ape-ass.face   of.all times ever

Our data on ES-*ever* would rather support an extraposition analysis. We saw that the English superlative forms of adjectives such as *best*, *cutest*, or *coolest* are only used in our non-English corpora in combination with ES-*ever*. Under an extraposition analysis, these forms could be specified lexically as requiring the element *ever* in their EXTRA value. If we, alternatively, assume that emphatic superlative expressions such as *ever* or their matrix language equivalents select the rest of the NP as adjuncts, we would have to mark the matrix language expressions as being incompatible with English superlative forms. Formulating such a restriction would be problematic as it is not obvious how the NP to which the emphatic expression would attach could be marked for containing an English superlative form. Also conceptually, it seems to us less plausible that there should be such a restriction on the matrix language emphatic expression. Assuming that some English superlative forms are borrowed with specific selectional requirements, on the other hand, would be a natural thing. We propose to treat the examples of apparent stacking as in (12) as instances of coordination, see (13).

(13)   JoWood sagt immernoch: Bestes Rollenspiel 2010/2011 und sowieso   ever.   [de, www]
       JoWood say still   best   role game   2017/2011 and in general ever

Consequently, we adapt the analysis of van Eynde (2007); Kay & Sag (2012b). We assume a superlative formation rule in each of our languages (including English) which optionally adds a phrase for the comparison class. This phrase is specified on the EXTRA list, which is a non-local feature for extraposed elements. Non-morphosyntactic superlatives (*favorite*, *top 10*) can lexically introduce such a phrase, too. Independently of ES-*ever*, the matrix language grammar will ensure that emphatic superlative expressions are extraposed, but will be realized inside the NP.[5]

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[4] Or both, of course, for varieties that allow for double superlative marking – such as in "*Next month sees the return of Singapore's most biggest collection of whiskies and spirits all in one place*" (enTenTen20)

[5] Even in English, AP-internal extraposition in *the biggest ever fireworks show* [en], is restricted to a few exceptions.

We can now turn to the lexical entry for ES-*ever*. Our proposal for our four languages is sketched in Figure 1. The phonological representation is rather similar to that of English *ever*, but the concrete realization will be highly influenced by the matrix language phonological system. There is a special lexical-identifier (LID) value for ES-*ever*, which we call *ever_matrix-language* here. Emphatic expressions like *of all times* or *ever* can appear as the comparison class phrase of a superlative. ES-*ever* is analyzed as an obligatorily extraposed modifier. With extra being a non-local feature, it is inside a sign's SYNSEM value and, as such, accessible to the selection by a modifier. We require that *ever* selects via its MOD value an element that has the LOCAL value of *ever* on its EXTRA list. Furthermore, the modified element must have a nominal semantics (*nom-obj*) with some superlative semantics in its RESTR set. This accounts for the cases lacking a non-morphological superlative and even having a non-adjective (as in *top 10 N ever*). We will turn to the specification in the CONTEXT (CTXT) feature in the next section.

While Figure 1 shows the lexical entry for ES-*ever* in Dutch, French, German, and Spanish, there might not be such a lexical entry for English. Instead, English might have a more general lexical entry for (universal) *ever* which would allow it to occur on a superlative's EXTRA list.

4 Analysis of borrowing Our proposal relates to two approaches to borrowing in formal grammar: *Diasystematic Construction Grammar* (DCxG, Höder 2018), and the *communicative situations* approach (Wiese, 2021). In both, multilectal and multilingual language users have a single grammar, whose elements (words, constructions, rules, …) can be marked as belonging to different varieties or lects.

In DCxG, a language user can be assumed to have a lexical entry of *ever* that is marked for English, a so-called *idioconstruction*. In addition, they may abstract from this a further lexical entry that is not marked for English alone, but compatible with both English and the matrix language subgrammar. This would be considered a *diaconstruction*. While this is a plausible approach to our data, we think that the aspect of ES-*ever* being a borrowing from English is lost in the rather symmetric notion of a diaconstruction.

Wiese (2021) describes a case very similar to ES-*ever*: In German, the (English) word *chicken* is used, but only in a very restricted sense: for chicken meat in diner contexts. She proposes a lexical entry for the borrowed form that has this restricted semantics (and an adjusted phonology), but that is marked as being associated with the English word *chicken*. It is not fully clear in her approach how this link between the matrix language lexical entry and the English word should be integrated into the grammar.

To our knowledge, there is no literature on borrowing in HPSG yet. However, we can use studies on register as starting point. Wilcock (1999) and Bender (2007) assume a single register value for an utterance. This means that there is no way to indicate that some element in a structure is a borrowing. But the behavior of adjectives with English superlative forms shows that this information must be available. Machicao y Priemer et al. (2022) propose that linguistic signs can change the likelihood of an utterance to belong to a register. We could, for example, assume that the form *cutest* is marked as belonging to an English language register, but the combination *cutest N ever* promotes the likelihood of being in a matrix language register. However, details of its combinatorics are are still open, and it does not allow an explicit encoding of our generalization.

Paolillo (2000) and Asadpour et al. (2022) consider register (and social meaning) an instance of *projective meaning* and build on the modelling of the CONTEXT feature in Green (1994). Under this view, an expression can contribute side messages, such as register information or social meaning. There is no restrictions on how many such meanings a single expression can contribute. Different signs can contribute different, and also contradicting meanings of this type. These percolate up to the utterance level. It is only at that level that these meanings are evaluated for compatibility with the communicative situation in which the sign is used.

We consider this approach flexible enough to model our data. In Figure 1, we included two "register" side messages into the lexical entry of ES-*ever*: First, that it belongs to the German subgrammar ([COMM-SIT *matrix-lang*]). Second, that it is a borrowing of the English lexeme *ever* (expressed via LID values).

Let us finally look at the constraint that English adjective forms can only combine with *ever*, but not with its matrix-language equivalent. We can assume lexical rule, sketched in Figure (2) that turns an English superlative adjective into one that has the matrix language ES-*ever* on its extra list. The output is then marked as belonging to the matrix language subgrammar.

5 Conclusion We have presented cross-linguistic data on emphatic superlative *ever*, which is a borrowed function word in at least Dutch, French, German, and Spanish. We have discussed some similarities and differences between these four languages and argued that the differences largely follow from differences in the matrix languages. We have proposed a modelling of the data in HPSG that is based on recent construction-grammar oriented frameworks (Höder, 2018; Wiese, 2021), and that explores further possibilities of existing HPSG approaches to register/social meaning as projective meaning (Paolillo, 2000; Asadpour et al., 2022).

	# hits (per mil.w.)	# ES-*ever*	# English noun	# English adjective	# both English
Dutch	1,532 (0.95)	85 (28% of 300)	14 (16% of 85))	10 (29%)	7 (8%)
German	5,504 (0.65)	159 (53% of 300)	4 (3% of 159)	4 (3%)	3 (2%)
French	2,550 (0.31)	18 (6% of 300)	2 (11% of 19)	5 (28%)	2 (11%)
Spanish	1,638 (0.09)	35 (12% of 300)	10 (29% of 35)	10 (29%)	8 (23%)

Table 1: Corpus distribution of ES-*ever*

	NPI *ever*	emphatic superlative
Dutch	ooit	ooit 'ever'
German	je(mals)	aller Zeiten 'of all times'
French	jamais	de tous les temps 'of all times'; (que jamais 'than ever')
Spanish	nunca, jamás	de siempre 'of always'; (que nunca 'than ever')

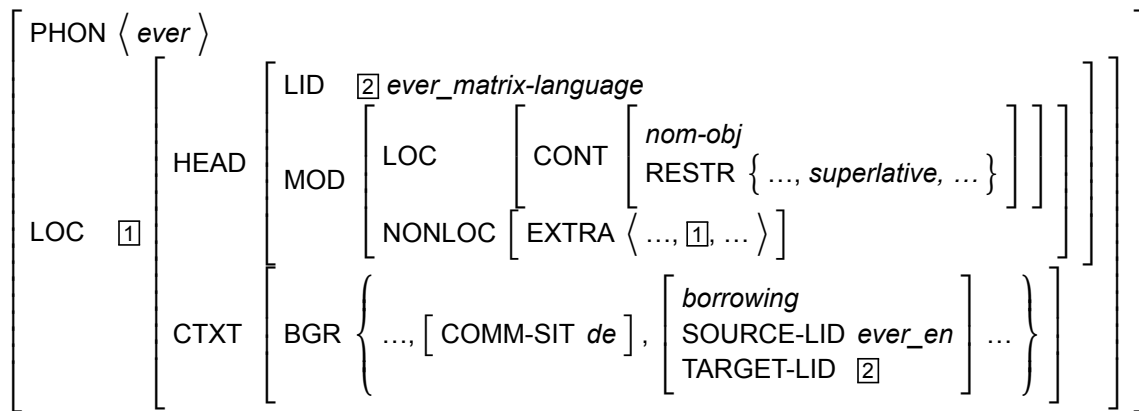Table 2: Matrix language emphatic superlative expressions

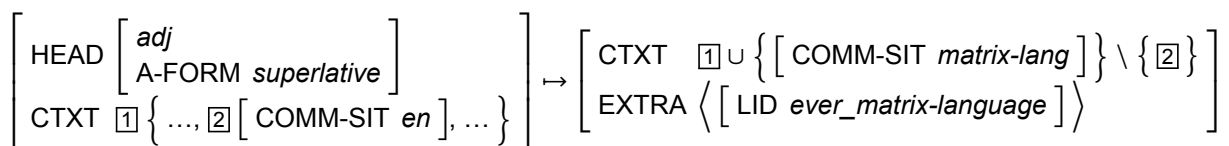Figure 1: Sketch of the lexical entry of borrowed ES-*ever*

Figure 2: Lexical rule for integrating English superlative forms into a target language by using *ever*

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