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Who knows the only reading of only ?

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Adjectival “*only*” has been claimed to resemble superlatives in several respects. Here I present a previously unnoted similarity supporting Heim’s (1999) superlative movement analysis.

Bhatt (2002) notes that, when modifying a relative head, “*only*” shares its interpretations with superlatives:

(1) the longest book John said Tolstoy had written

- a. *High* reading: the longest book of the books about which John said Tolstoy wrote them
- b. *Low* reading: John said X is the longest book Tolstoy wrote.

(2) the only book John said Tolstoy had written

- a. *High* reading: X is the only book about which John said Tolstoy had written X
- b. *Low* reading: X is the only book Tolstoy wrote (according to John)

Moreover, superlatives and adjectival “*only*” behave alike with respect to NPI licensing.

Superlatives are also known to allow three readings: absolute, comparative, and, in intensional contexts, intermediate (Szabolcsi, 1986; Heim, 1994, 1999; Farakas and Kiss, 2000; Sharvit and Stateva, 2002).

(3) John climbed the highest mountain.

- a. absolute reading: John climbed the Everest
- b. comparative reading: John climbed a higher mountain than anybody else in the context

(4) John needs to climb the highest mountain

intermediate reading: John needs to climb a 3500m mountain, Mary needs to climb a 3000m mountain, and Bill needs to climb a 2000m mountain. Therefore, John's needs are the most demanding regardless of what size mountain the other people will ultimately climb. For example, a world where John climbs a 3500m mountain, and Bill and Mary climb a 5000m mountain is a world compatible with John's needs.

What has gone unnoted in the literature is that there is a class of English speakers for whom “*only*” allows similar readings.

(5) John read the only book.

absolute reading: John read the only book relevant in the context

In particular, these speakers accept the comparative reading in (6), where John is the only relevant person to read a book.

(6) comparative reading: John read two books, Bill read a newspaper, and Mary read a magazine.

Formally, adjectival “only” takes a singleton set and returns the same set. There is no obvious way to derive the comparative reading of (5) simply by modifying the restrictor of “only” (in the way that we might for the comparative reading of (3), by restricting the restrictor of “*est*” to mountains climbed). For instance, modifying the restrictor of “only” to books read by someone, we would merely obtain a reading on which John read the only book that got read. On the movement analysis, however, (5) can have the LF in (7), and (7) conveys that John is the only person who read a book, as desired.

(7) John only . x [x read ~~the~~ book]
==> Only John read a book

Moreover, some informants accepted the intermediate reading of (8) in the context in (9), which can also be explained by moving *only* between *John* and *need*.

(8) John needs to read the only book.

(9) John needs to read two books.
Mary needs to write a paper.
Fred needs to wash dishes.

These data support the movement analysis of Heim (1999), but remain unexplained under the analyses of Farkas and Kiss (2000) and Sharvit and Stateva (2002).

References

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