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[Feminine] in a high position

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In German, the names of many professions have both a masculine and a feminine form. The feminine form is often derived from the masculine by the suffix */-in/* (sometimes accompanied by a vowel change in the stem as in (1c)). (1) shows examples of this derivation:

- (1) a. Lehrer ('male teacher') --> Lehrerin ('female teacher')
- b. Politiker ('male politician') --> Politikerin ('female politician')
- c. Arzt ('male medical doctor') --> Ärztin ('female medical doctor')
- d. Friseur ('male hairdresser') --> Friseurin ('female hairdresser')

When combined with a superlative, the gender-marked forms allow two distinct readings. We focus here on the feminine forms. Consider the newspaper headline in (2): It could be used to describe a situation where Merkel is now the most popular of the female politicians but there may be male politicians that are even more popular than her ((2a)). It can also be used in a situation where Merkel is the most popular of all politicians ((2b)).

- (2) Merkel jetzt beliebteste Politiker-in Deutschlands.
Merkel now most popular politician-FEM Germany
 - a. 'Merkel now most popular female politician in Germany.'
 - b. 'Merkel now most popular politician in Germany.'
- (3) Merkel ist die beliebteste Kanzler-in aller Zeiten.
Merkel is the most popular chancellor-FEM of all times
 - a. 'Merkel is the most popular female chancellor of all times.'
 - b. 'Merkel is the most popular chancellor of all times.'

Reading (2b) must be considered distinct from reading (2a) for two reasons. For one, the occurrence of *jetzt* ('now') (2) implicates that the assertion of (2) is false for past times. But (2b) can be used at a time when Merkel has already been the most popular female politician for a while, but has only just edged out her male rivals. In this situation, the implicature of paraphrase (2a) would not be satisfied. The second reason (2b) is distinct from (2a) is that (2) could be used in a situation where Merkel is the only female politician. Reading (2a) would amount to a presupposition failure in such a situation because the superlative presupposes that there are items for comparison. This

is corroborated by that fact that (3) is acceptable in the current situation where Merkel is the only female German chancellor ever. Paraphrase (3a) would be a presupposition failure in the current situation, while reading (3b) must be available.

Example (4) shows that the ambiguity arises also in non-copular sentences. This rules out the possibility that gender agreement between Merkel and the superlative DP is responsible for the ambiguity.

- (4) Selbst die beliebteste Kanzler-in aller Zeiten macht Fehler.
even the most popular chancellor-FEM of all times makes mistakes
a. 'Even the most popular female chancellor of all times can make a mistake.'
b. 'Even the most popular chancellor of all times can make a mistake.'

While the male and female forms of the professions exhibit the ambiguity just described, the adjective *female* in (5a) and the non-profession noun *sister* in (5b) only allow the interpretation corresponding to (2a) and (3a).

- (5) a. die beliebteste weibliche Politiker-in
the most popular female politician
b. meine jüngste Schwester
my youngest sister

Some other languages, such as Spanish and Bulgarian, seem to show the same pattern of data. We provide here Bulgarian data. (6) displays the same ambiguity as (2).

- (6) naj-populjarnata pianist-ka
most-popular-the pianist-FEM
'the most popular female pianist'
'the most popular pianist'

In English, however, we could not find nouns that display the ambiguity. Noun phrases like *the best waitress*, *my youngest sister*, and *the tallest policewoman* are unambiguous just like the German examples in (5).

To explain the ambiguity illustrated in (2), we propose that gender marked profession names are ambiguous between two kinds of lexical entries: 1) a lexical entry where gender is part of the lexical item such that *Politikerin* means the same as female politician; 2) a lexical entry where gender is a grammatical feature of the noun which is licensed by a agreement with a gender feature in a higher position that is interpreted outside the scope of the superlative.