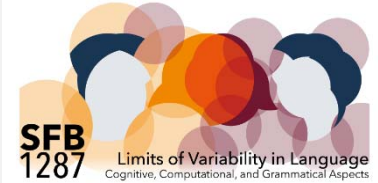# Comments on "Superlative constructions: Towards a cross-linguistic typology"

by Vera Hohaus (University of Manchester)

Malte Zimmermann (Universität Potsdam)

SPA kickoff workshop "Scales, Degree, and Implicature",
Universität Potsdam, 28th May 2021
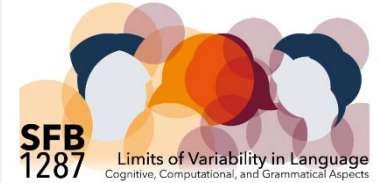
Comments on Superlatives

Basic Theme:

How to fill a gap in the functional lexicon by a combination of pragmatic and grammatical means (implicatures, DEF-marking, FOC-marking)?

More specifically:

Samoan is a [+DSP] language that lacks a degree-based superlative operator but exploits mechanisms from other domains to express superlative-like readings.
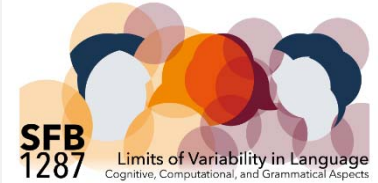
Comments on Superlatives

More specifically:

Samoan is a [+DSP] language that lacks a degree-based superlative operator but exploits mechanisms from other domains to express superlative-like readings.

Q1: How precisely does this work? What is the function of SCALES, scale-related predicates, and alternatives (comparison classes)?

- intensification (on degree scales?)

- exhaustification (over degree scales? over comparison sets/alternatives?)

- maximization (over degree scales? over comparison sets?)

- scale-based (?) extension narrowing to ^+S...
(implicit comparison against members of comparison class)

  $\Rightarrow$ (relevance-based) pragmatic witchcraft!?
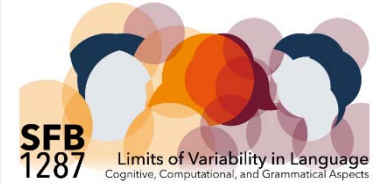
Comments on Superlatives

More specifically:

Samoan is a [+DSP] language that lacks a degree-based superlative operator but exploits mechanisms from other domains to express superlative-like readings.

Q2:   Why do [+DSP] languages have lexical items for expressing comparison, but not for superlatives?

... this goes beyond Samoan, cf. Hausa (Newman 2000, Zimmermann 2009), Yoruba, and other languages with verbal comparison constructions
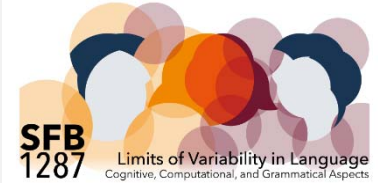
Comments on Superlatives

Structure of this comment:

A. Some more background

B. Five comments

C. Some cross-linguistic comparison

Comments on Superlatives

A. Some more background

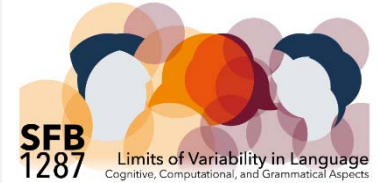Hohaus (2014): Samoan *atu*-comparative employs the **indirect strategy**

$\Rightarrow$ comparison against some contextually given standard, to be provided by an explicit frame-setter.

[[atu]] = $\lambda c_{<d>}$. $\lambda R_{<d,<e,t>>}$. $\lambda x_{<e>}$. $max(\lambda d.R(d)(x))$ > c

Hohaus (2014: 108, ex. 222)

(1)   Compared to Peter, Malia is older.
       (= Compared to the Peter-degree, Malia is older)
       $\Rightarrow$ Malia is older than Peter

Comments on Superlatives

A. Some more background

⇒ this also works with UNMARKED POS scale-adjectives, both in Samoan and English:

(2) a. E   matua   Malia i   l͡o   Pita
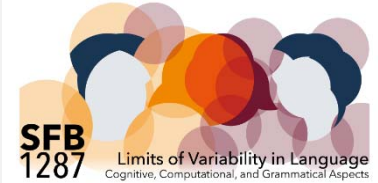   TAM   old   Mary prep comp Peter
     (Hohaus 2014: 103, ex. 203)

   b. Compared to Peter, Malia is old.

⇒ Comparative interpretation driven by the presence of a single explicit contextual ALTERNATIVE

⇒ Superlative interpretation driven by the presence of n>1 explicit or implicit contextual ALTERNATIVES

So: Number of alternatives has an effect on final interpretation!

Comments on Superlatives

B. Five Comments

i. Degree scales seem to play an important role in the expression of superlative forms with intensifier (*lava*) AND with UNMARKED:

   INT: Mary is really tall = Mary's degree of tallness is located unusually high on tallness scale (in ^+S?)
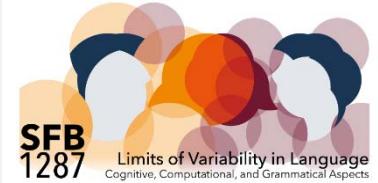
$\Rightarrow$ PRAG: degree of other C-members is not $\Rightarrow$ Mary is the tallest

   UNMARKED: Mary is tall = Mary's degree of tallness located in the upper part of the scale ^+S

$\Rightarrow$ PRAG(slide 73): degree of other C-members is not $\Rightarrow$ Mary is the tallest

Q: What kind of pragmatic mechanism would trigger extension narrowing/ exclusion of C-members?

Comments on Superlatives

B. Five Comments

i. Degree scales seem to play an important role in the expression of superlative forms with intensifier (*lava*) AND with UNMARKED:

Q: What is the difference between the two strategies, if any? Does (H20) entail that there is no higher mountain? Could one say (3)?
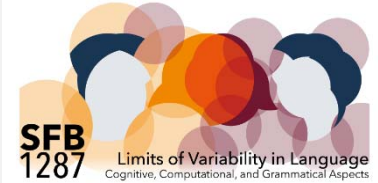
(3) E maualuga lava Mauga Silisili ae e maualuga atu Mauna Kea i nai lō Mauga Silisili.

   intended: 'Mount Silisili is really high, but Mauna Kea is (even) higher than Mount Silisili.'

Q: Why isn't the *extremely*-interpretation of the unmarked form blocked by the intensifier: <POS(tall), lava(TALL)> ?

   $\Rightarrow$ [[POS(tall)]] $\Rightarrow$ tall, but not extremely tall

Comments on Superlatives

B. Five Comments

ii.   POS-based superlatives and scalar particles?

Scalar particles can be used to cancel the implicature that a predicate holds of a given entity to a maximal degree
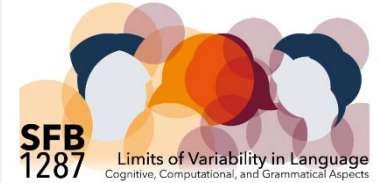
(4) Q: Who's tall?
   a. Mary is tall   (PRAG implicature: the tallest)
   b. But Melissa is even taller (entails: Mary is not the tallest)

Q: Does Samoan have scalar particles? What would be their function?

⇒ If there arre scalar particles, can they be used to obviate the alleged pragmatic extension-narrowing implicature attached to POS?

Comments on Superlatives

B. Five Comments

iii. Scale-related predicates and ADD particles

Q: Why is (H24) infelicitous (slide 41, 42)?

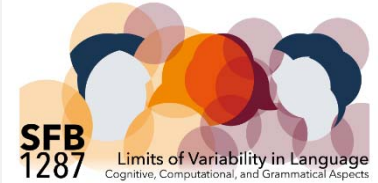CONTEXT: Mary's height is 185cm, and Temukisa's height is 190cm.
            (That's really tall!)

(H24)   a. E   umi   Temukisa.   b. #'Ae   e   umi   fo'i Malia.
              TAM   tall   NAME   but TAM   tall   also Mary
              (Lit.) 'Temukisa is tall.' (Lit.) 'But Mary is also tall.'

Q: Why doesn't the addition of the additive particle block the application
   of extension narrowing?
   See, e.g., Bade & Renans (2021) on interaction of ADD and covert EXH!

Comments on Superlatives

B. Five Comments

iii. Scale-related predicates and ADD particles

Q: Does conjunction help?
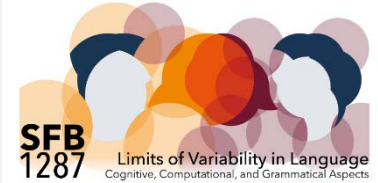
(H24')   E umi Temukisa & Malia

Q: What happens if Mary and Temukisa are of equal height = 190cm?

(H24'')   E umi Temukisa. b. 'Ae e umi fo'i Malia.

⇒ If (H24'') is still bad, there may be a difference between extension narrowing (not cancellable) and EXH (cancellable)?
Covert EXH should be blocked by ADD!
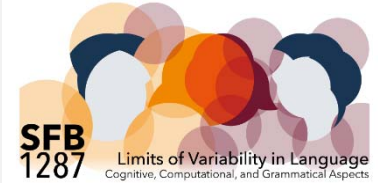
Comments on Superlatives

B. Five Comments

iv. On the (different?) role of grammatical focus marking and implicit contrast in providing clues for the comparison set...

Hohaus (2014) provides ample evidence that the superlative interpretation with unmarked POS adjectives is driven by some notion of contrast (in context).

Hohaus (this talk) suggests that implicit QUDs are responsible for extension narrowing (= EXH?)

Q: Does explicit FOC-marking have the same effect? Or is the superlative interpretation there supported in the absence of salient alternatives or a contextual comparison class: structural EXH-marking?
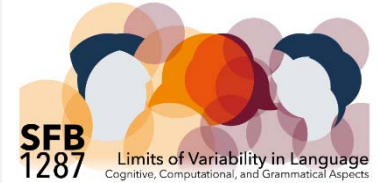
Comments on Superlatives

B. Five Comments

v. Do scales matter? (Focus-driven) EXH vs EXH+scale-based?

Q: Coordinations with non-gradable predicates such as origin or nationality terms?

(5) Malia is Samoan and Temukisa is (also) Samoan.

$\Rightarrow$ If the translational equivalent of (5) is good, there must be something special about scale-related predicates...
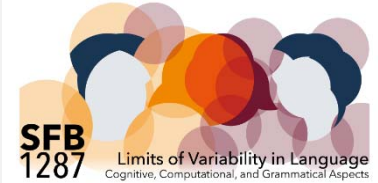
Comments on Superlatives

C. Cross-linguistic comparison

Hohaus (slide 89): Having a negative setting of the DSP restricts a language to implicit comparison, but not vice versa.

$\Rightarrow$ implicit comparison and hence implicit or pragmatic superlative formation should be possible in any language, at least in principle, modulo other factors such as lexical blocking...
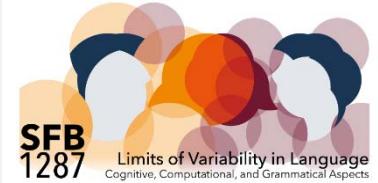
Comments on Superlatives

C. Cross-linguistic comparison

Q1:   Are the grammatical and pragmatic mechanisms for the alternative
       expression of superlatives universal?

MORPH: Shilan is tall with no equal. $\Rightarrow$ semantic entailment ✓

COMP: Shilan is taller than everyone. $\Rightarrow$ semantic entailment ✓

INT: Shilan is really tall.

             $\Rightarrow$ pragmatic, cancellable ✓ : but Lorin is really tall, too.

Comments on Superlatives

C. Cross-linguistic comparison

Q1:   Are the grammatical and pragmatic mechanisms for the alternative
        expression of superlatives universal?

OTHER

UNMARKED: Who is tall? Shilan is tall (QUD-driven EXH-implicature):
                contextual alternatives made salient by question context
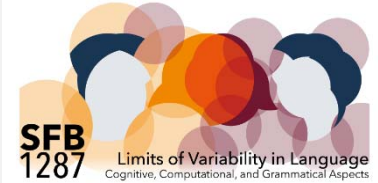
                EXH/SUP-effect disappears with predicate focus:

(6) A: Tell me something about Shilan. B: She's tall.   (vs. She's the tallest)

FOC: It is Shilan that's tall   (cleft-induced EXH, conventionalized?):
                contextual alternatives made salient by focus marking

DET: Shilan is the tall one   (semantic uniqueness entailment)

Comments on Superlatives
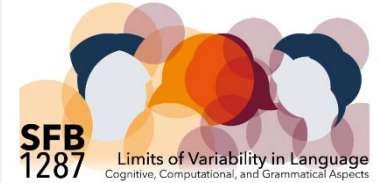
C. Cross-linguistic comparison

Q1:   Are the grammatical and pragmatic mechanisms for the alternative
         expression of superlatives universal?

OTHER

UNMARKED: Who is tall? Shilan is tall (QUD-driven EXH-implicature):
                contextual alternatives made salient by question context

$\Rightarrow$ The only difference seems to be in the nature of extension narrowing,
   as this interpretive effect does not seem cancellable $\neq$ English

Comments on Superlatives

C. Cross-linguistic comparison

$\Rightarrow$ Another parallel between Samoan and English?
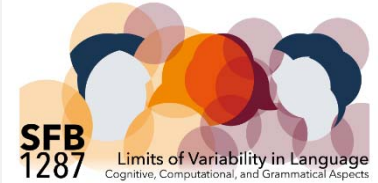
No negative strengthening with strong (+S) ADJ!

(H26) b. E lē toa=tele tagata i Perth.
TAM not HUM=many person in Perth
(Lit.) 'The people are not many in Perth.'

//$\Rightarrow$// 'There are few people in Perth'

$\Rightarrow$ A difference? No lexical blocking INT //$\Rightarrow$// POS(Adj) = SUP

Q: What if UNMARKED = superlative?

ADJ + atu   = COMP
ADJ + $\varnothing_{SUP}$ = SUP $\Rightarrow$ Weakened to POS in the absence of contextual alternatives?

Comments on Superlatives

C. Cross-linguistic comparison

Q3:   Is there an implicational universal SUP $\Rightarrow$ COMP in [+DSP] languages?
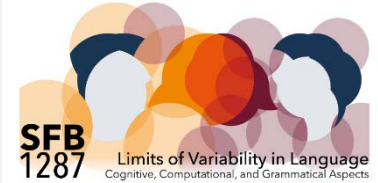
$\Rightarrow$ Superlative form semantically more complex as it involves a relation AND universal quantification, plus a contextually given domain of quantification (comparison class):

(7) $[[\text{SUP}]] = \lambda C_{<d,t>}.\ \lambda R_{<d,<e,t>>}.\ \lambda x_{<e>}.\ \forall d\ [C(d) \to \max(\lambda d'.R(d')(x)) > d]$

$\Rightarrow$ Lexicalisations of SUP are also not found in [+DSP] languages with verb-based comparison: Hausa, Yoruba

e.g., Hausa comparatives involve the verb *fi* 'exceed' (H4) , but there is no verbal lexicalization of 'exceed-all'

Comments on Superlatives

General Implications for the SPA-project

$\Rightarrow$ Cross-linguistically, superlatives make reference to scales AND sets
        of contextual alternatives at the same time:

(8)   Joshua is the smartest kid #(ever, in our class, among them, ...)

        ... so they should make for a good testing ground of studying the
        interaction of scales and alternatives in natural language.