

A most serious and extraordinary problem. Intensification of adjectives in Dutch, German, and English

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1. Introduction

We can call a building ‘high’ but also ‘very high’, say that someone ‘suffers’ or ‘suffers strongly’, or exclaim that something is a ‘mess’ or a ‘pure mess’. By adding *very*, *strongly*, or *pure*, we as speakers indicate that a certain aspect of a property (in the case of an adjective), activity (verb), or substance (in the case of a noun) does not hold in an average way but ranks high on a scale (cf. Ghesquière & Davidse 2011). Such indications of high degree are called intensification and the lexical means used to express it are called intensifiers. In this paper, we will focus on intensification of adjectives.

Intensification presupposes the possibility of gradability. Most adjectives have this semantic property (*high*, *red*, *happy*, etc.); nongradable or absolute adjectives, like *rectangular* or *pregnant*, miss this property, although a gradable interpretation can sometimes be coerced by adding an intensifier, for example *very pregnant*, as in *Denver Broncos star poses for a GQ spread alongside his very pregnant country singer wife*,¹ German *hochschwanger* ‘very pregnant; in the late stages of pregnancy’² or Dutch *zo zwanger als een konijn* ‘as pregnant as a rabbit’.³

Intensification always involves a judgment of the speaker. It is the speaker who considers the property being present to a degree which deviates from the average. This judgment can be more or less subjective, depending on the adjective and the intensifier which together constitute the judgment. A judgment like *This building is very tall* is open for discussion as the addressee can disagree on the basis of comparison with the tallness of other buildings. This makes the judgment more

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out and for the example. More generally, we thank the editors and reviewers for the constructive feedback on our paper. We also profited from the feedback from the audience at the Germanic Sandwich conference in Leuven, January 11-12, 2013.

² <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hochschwanger>.

³ A.o. via <http://www.scholieren.com/boek/10616/krijg-nou-tieten>.

‘objective’ than when an adjective like *beautiful* is used, as in *These flowers are very beautiful*. Here, the judgment is “in the eye of the beholder.” Not only the adjectives, but also the intensifiers can vary in subjectivity. The conventional meaning of some intensifiers imply strong subjectivity of the judgment. For Gutzmann & Turgay (2012: 150) this is sufficient reason to distinguish what they call expressive intensifiers (EIs): “Semantically, the differences between EIs and standard degree elements is that beside their intensifying function, EIs convey an additional expressive speaker attitude, which is not part of the descriptive content of the sentence they occur in. That is, beside raising the degree to which the party was cool in [Du hast gestern eine *sau* coole Party verpasst], *sau* expressively displays that the speaker is emotional about the degree to which the party was cool.”

It is not always immediately clear whether a specific intensifier has this expressive aspect or not. This is because the degree of expressivity of an intensifier can vary from weak to strong. Frequently used and long existing intensifiers like English *very*, Dutch *erg* ‘very’, or German *sehr* ‘very’ are not expressive (anymore). Intensifiers like *terribly* or *awfully* have a moderate degree of expressivity, and ‘new’ intensifiers like *kanker* ‘cancer’ in Dutch (*kankerlelijk* ‘cancer ugly’) are strongly expressive (cf. Foolen et al. 2012). Waksler (2012) shows that when English *super*, *uber*, *so*, and *totally* are used in marked contexts (for example: *hot Lesbians ... I am so giving up men for them*), they adopt expressive meaning as well, which she calls ‘over-the-top-intensification’.

In this paper we will point out the expressive character of some intensifiers in footnotes, but the distinction between expressive and ‘normal’ intensifiers will not be our main concern. Instead, we will focus on the question how intensification is realized. Most examples of intensifiers we have given so far take the form of an adverb which is combined with the adjective into an adjectival phrase. There are, however, other ways of intensification. For instance, the intensifier can be the first part of a compound (Dutch *aalglad* ‘eel slippery’) or a prefixoid (Dutch *beregoed* ‘very good’). Compounds can often be paraphrased in an analytical way: *Zo glad als een aal* ‘as slippery as an eel’. Such constructions, with the pattern *zo Adj als NP* ‘as Adj as NP’ can be considered as being intensifying in themselves. In spoken language, paralinguistic cues like strong accent or lengthening (*glád*, *gláááád*) are also used for intensifying purposes.

Languages differ in their preferences for these and other intensifying forms and constructions. In this paper, we will focus on English, Dutch, and German and compare them in their preferences for some of the intensifying forms. More specifically, we will investigate three types of intensification: In section 2, we will ask whether the languages differ with regard to the use of adverb, compound, and prefixoid forms. In section 3, we will pay special attention to a procedure of intensification that has received less attention in the past, namely the use of the

comparative and superlative forms of adjectives. In section 4, we will take a closer look at intensifying constructions with *möglich*, *mogelijk* and *possible*. We will see that besides the simple positive use of the adjective, like in *as big as possible*, a superlative often occurs in this context.

We will round off in section 5 with the question whether and to which extent the results of our first exploration fit van Haeringen’s (1956) observation that Dutch typically takes a pattern in between German and English. In line with his general conclusions we hypothesize that German tends to more ‘synthetic’ forms, whereas Dutch, and even more so English, tends to ‘analytic’ forms. Van Haeringen himself has shown these preferences in the domain of inflection, Schlücker (2012) did the same for nouns. For example, the German compound *Rotwein* has Dutch *rode wijn* and English *red wine* as phrasal counterparts.

We realize, with van Haeringen, that the distinction between synthetic and analytic is rather gradual than absolute, cf. Van Haeringen (1956: 73), who stated “... that the terms ‘synthetic’ and ‘analytic’ ... can only be used as global indications, and that the winding line of language history doesn’t obey those more or less artificial straightforward lines.”⁴ For our present purposes, however, we will simply identify this distinction with the difference between morphological and phrasal/syntactic structures. Our paper is meant as a first exploration of adjectival intensification phenomena in the three languages. Our observations and tentative claims are based on our own intuitions, reference grammars, and selected examples of language use, mainly taken from the internet.

2. Adverbial, compound and prefixoid intensification

At first sight, adverbial intensification of adjectives is equally available and productive in German, Dutch, and English. It has been observed more than once (cf. Foolen et al. 2012), that the inventory of intensifying adverbs is expanded again and again by recruiting new ones from other word classes. It seems that the steady renewal of adverbial and prefixoid intensifiers (and other intensifying constructions) is universally driven by the need for emotional expressivity.

Typically, the original meaning of the adverbial intensifiers has a strong negative connotation, which contributes to their expressivity (cf. Jing-Schmidt 2007). Differences between languages can be found, however, with respect to the specific source domains from which the intensifiers are recruited. Jing-Schmidt (2007: 432)

⁴ “... dat de termen ‘synthetisch’ en ‘analytisch’... alleen als grove, uiterst grove aanduidingen bruikbaar zijn, en dat de kronkelende lijn van de taalgeschiedenis zich aan die min of meer kunstmatige rechtlijnigheden weinig laat gelegen liggen.”

observes a “strong emotional potency of fear of mortality in this [Chinese] culture”. Whereas German allegedly has a certain preference for words from the excremental domain and English for the sexual,⁵ Dutch intensifiers often are taken from the domain of disease (*kanker* ‘cancer’, *tering-* ‘tuberculosis’, cf. Haverkamp 2013).

Whereas adverbial intensification can be situated at the analytic side of the analytic-synthetic spectrum, prefixoids (cf. Booij 2010) are much closer to the synthetic pole. In the latter type of intensification, the first part of a compound has lost its literal meaning and has instead assumed a construction-dependent semantics that is in this case more general than the original meaning.⁶ This has happened with German *hoch-*, as in *hochinteressant*, *hochaktuell*, *hochintelligent*, etc., and with Dutch *reuze-* (lit. ‘giant’), as in *reuzegroot* ‘very big, i.e., as big as a giant’, *reuzevervelend* ‘very annoying’, *reuze-interessant* ‘very interesting’, etc.⁷

For English, prefixoid intensifiers don’t seem to be common.⁸ It can be observed, however, that English has borrowed the German preposition *über* ‘over’ for prefixoid intensification, cf. English *übercool*, *übersexy*. We can interpret this as an imitation of a typical German pattern of intensification, which is not ‘endogenous’ in English.⁹

In between adverbial and prefixoid intensification, we find compounds. In this type, the first part of the compound has intensifying meaning. A case in point is *spinnijdig* ‘very angry, lit. spider-angry’. Interestingly enough, *spin* ‘spider’ primarily means ‘very’ in this context and only *nijdig* ‘angry’ can be intensified by *spin*. In other words, there are strong collocational relations between *spin* and *nijdig* (van der Wouden 1998). Fletcher (1980), in his seminal study on “adjective-specific intensifiers in Dutch”, suggested that Dutch would use this type of formation more often than both German and English, cf. Fletcher (1980: 447): “Dutch is thus not alone in having adjective-specific intensifiers; it is however unique in several aspects of

⁵ Cf. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fucking>.

⁶ As Booij shows, prefixoids may grammaticalize into full-fledged prefixes. A case in point is German *Haupt* ‘head’ that means ‘main’ in words like *Hauptbahnhof* ‘main railway station’ and *Hauptgebäude* ‘main buildings’. *Haupt* can no longer be used as a noun in standard German, it has been replaced by *Kopf*.

⁷ Van Goethem (2014) points out that in Dutch, ‘debonding’ of some prefixoids can be observed, that is, they can be used as a separate word, like an adverb, for example *het is hier reuze gezellig* ‘it is very nice here’ instead of *het is hier reuzegezellig*. This phenomenon is not totally absent in German, but less salient, which we interpret as a tendency in Dutch towards analytic forms.

⁸ A key exception may be the English intensifier *key* that appears to have developed from a left-hand part of a compound (*the key position*) via usage as a general intensifier (*of key importance*) to an adjective with the meaning “extremely important” (*forgetting is key to a healthy mind*), cf. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/key>.

⁹ We can observe the same borrowing in Dutch, cf. *schattige en überinteressante feitjes* ‘cute and very interesting little facts’, <http://newsmonkey.be/article/3470>.

their formation and use. Particularly striking to me is their pervasiveness in the language.” Recently, intensifying or ‘elative’ compounds (as Hoeksema 2012 calls them) have attracted renewed attention. In a number of publications, Oebel (see, for example Oebel ed. 2012) has documented conventionalized intensification forms in different European languages. He calls this compound type ‘Volkssuperlative’, as they typically reflect ‘folk’ views on animals, plants, objects and their properties (although Piirainen (2012) shows that some of these compounds came into the various European vernaculars from literary works or the Bible). Oebel (ed. 2012) contains some contrastive papers as well, but not for the languages we are interested in. In fact, we are not aware of any attempts to look at German, Dutch and German intensification data from a comparative viewpoint.

In a small corpus study, taking the German compound *kristallklar* ‘crystal clear’ as a point of departure, we found an extremely mixed picture, see (1):¹⁰

(1)

Die Geschäftsordnung ist da <i>kristallklar</i>	Het Reglement is op dat punt <i>heel duidelijk</i>
Es muss <i>kristallklar</i> sein	Er mag <i>geen twijfel</i> over bestaan
Das Thema [...] ist im Grunde so <i>kristallklar</i>	het thema [...] is eigenlijk zo <i>overduidelijk</i>
ganz eindeutig und <i>kristallklar</i>	<i>duidelijk en helder</i>
Polizei und Justizpolitik sind <i>kristallklare</i> Elemente der Eigenstaatlichkeit	Politie en justitie behoren <i>glashelder</i> tot die soevereiniteit
einen <i>kristallklaren</i> Bericht	een <i>glashelder</i> verslag
eine <i>kristallklare</i> Botschaft	in <i>heldere en precieze</i> bewoordingen

To complicate matters even more, if we take Dutch *kristalhelder* as a point of departure, we see that the majority of translations into German show analytical forms:

¹⁰ We expanded the search of Haverkamp (2013) in the Europarl corpus (cf. Koehn 2005; we took our data from the Europarl data on the website of Matthias Hüning).

(2)

dat het hier om een <i>kristalhelder</i> , gemakkelijk te begrijpen onderwerp gaat.	daß wir es hier mit einer Frage zu tun haben, die <i>völlig eindeutig</i> und leicht verständlich ist.
Onze boodschap aan de Turkse regering moet op dit punt <i>kristalhelder</i> zijn.	wobei unsere zentrale Botschaft an die türkische Regierung in einem Punkt <i>absolut klar und deutlich</i> sein muss.
Het uitgangspunt van deze richtlijn is <i>kristalhelder</i> .	Der Ausgangspunkt für diese Richtlinie ist <i>glasklar</i>
Het moet ons <i>kristalhelder</i> zijn wat nu onze volgende stap moet zijn.	Wir müssen <i>unmissverständlich deutlich</i> machen, was wir als Nächstes tun müssen.
Laten we daar <i>kristalhelder</i> over zijn.	Lassen Sie uns darüber <i>völlig im Klaren</i> sein.

We note that the fixed expression *crystal clear* exists, but we haven't looked further into English data. One problem here is that, due to the spelling conventions of English, A+N compounds and phrasal AP + NP combinations are not always easily distinguishable.¹¹

Only quantitative research can decide whether Dutch really uses the compound intensification type more often than German and English. If it does, then the question remains how we should interpret this against the background of the Germanic sandwich hypothesis. If, in the end, it turns out that German is stronger in prefixoids and English in adverbial intensification, then Fletcher's observation that Dutch uses compound intensification abundantly could be interpreted as covering the 'middle ground' of the cline.

3. Degrees of comparison used for intensification

The meaning of the comparative and the superlative has to do with degree, so these forms are natural candidates for being used for intensification. In their 'normal' use, they typically indicate that a certain property holds to a higher degree for A than for B (the comparative), or holds for A in the strongest degree compared to similar objects (the superlative). As we will see in section 3.1 and 3.2, this aspect of comparing

¹¹ "there are places where the boundary between morphological compound and syntactic construction is unclear" (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1644).

different objects typically disappears when the comparative and superlative forms are used for intensifying purposes.¹²

With respect to degrees of comparison, the Germanic sandwich cline seems to hold. In English, adjectives with more than one syllable preferably take analytical forms (*more ugly, most ugly*) or *have* to take an analytical form (*more extensive, most extensive*).¹³ German, on the other hand, prefers morphological comparatives and superlatives (*umfangreicher, umfangreichst*), whereas Dutch takes an intermediate position, allowing for both variants in the case of longer words, with a tendency towards more analytic forms.¹⁴ Table 1 gives an overview of the default comparative and superlative formation in the three languages:

German	umfangreich	umfangreicher	umfangreichst
English	extensive	more extensive	most extensive
Dutch	omvangrijk	omvangrijker	omvangrijkst
Dutch		meer omvangrijk	meest omvangrijk

Table 1. Degrees of comparison in German, English and Dutch

Real life examples of the two variants in Dutch are given in (3).

- (3)
- a. Handige functionaliteiten voor *omvangrijkere* aangiften¹⁵
'Convenient functions for larger declarations'
 - b. Vodafone storing *omvangrijkste* storing ooit¹⁶
'Vodafone failure largest failure ever'
 - c. En bij de *meer omvangrijke* storingen - buiten de dagdienst – tref je zelf maatregelen en voorzieningen om de zaken weer zo snel mogelijk in gang te zetten.¹⁷
'And in the case of larger failures – outside the day shift – you yourself take precautions and facilities to get things going again as soon as possible.'

¹² In the literature, this use of the comparative and superlative is called 'absolute'.

¹³ As a reviewer did not fail to point out, the situation is slightly more complicated than that. Adjectives with one or two syllables can easily take *-er*, though *more* is possible, (but then again, in some cases the morphological form is clearly preferred, *?more happy* is odd) while adjectives with more syllables almost always take *more*. Moreover, derived adjectives such as *cyclic* never take *-er* (and this is just one of many complications). See, among others, Hilpert (2008) and Mondorf (2009).

¹⁴ Cf. <https://onzetaal.nl/taaladvies/advies/meest-origineel-origineelst>.

¹⁵ <http://www.elsevierfiscaal.nl/aangiftesoftware/gebruikerservaringen/artikel/228/handige-functionaliteiten-voor-omvangrijkere-aangiften>.

¹⁶ <http://www.gsmhelpdesk.nl/read.php?id=6979>.

¹⁷ <http://www.indeed.nl/Omvangrijk-vacatures-in-Eindhoven>.

- d. In Zeddam komt na vijftien jaar een einde aan een van de *meest omvangrijke* bodem- en grondwatersaneringen van Gelderland.¹⁸
'After fifteen years, one of the most extensive soil and groundwater clean-up projects in Gelderland comes to an end in Zeddam.'

When the cline holds for the degrees of comparison in their normal use, we can ask whether it can also be observed when the degrees of comparison are used for intensifying purposes.

3.1. *The comparative used for intensification*

A German example of a comparative used for (moderate)¹⁹ intensification is the following:

- (4) Wir haben ein größeres Problem
We have a bigger Problem
'We have quite a big problem'

In Dutch and English, this usage of the comparative is rare, cf. (5):

- (5) a. ?We hebben een groter/kleiner probleem
b. We hebben een tamelijk groot probleem/een serieus probleem/...
c. *We have a bigger/smaller problem
d. We have quite a problem here/we have a rather serious problem here/...

¹⁸ <http://www.montferland.info/index.php?mediumid=2&pagid=179&stukid=16979>.

¹⁹ Comparative intensification typically doesn't assume expressive meaning. The 'moderate intensity' meaning doesn't evoke extreme values, which fits the observation that it doesn't evoke expressive meaning. Expressivity seems to go together with extreme grades. For a closer look at 'grading in the middle area' see Nouwen (2013).

As stated in the ANS (1997),²⁰ adverbial and other types of intensification are preferred instead. However, for a few adjectives, the absolute use of the comparative is lexicalized:²¹

- (6) a. de rijpere vrouw
 'the more mature woman'
 b. de betere boekhandel
 'the better bookshop'

3.2. *The superlative used for intensification*

Because of its 'highest degree' meaning, the superlative can easily assume an intensifying meaning, probably easier than the comparative and the positive. For Romance languages, this absolute use has been observed many times, cf. for example Beltrama & Boschnak (2014: 2) (their example 4):²²

- (7) La casa è belli-ssima
 The house is beautiful-ISSIMO
 'The house is extremely beautiful'

Whereas this absolute use typically occurs in predicative position in Italian, it takes the attributive position in Germanic languages. The *San Francisco Chronicle* of January 21, 2009 published a cartoon, showing George W. Bush, apparently just waking up, exclaiming to his wife:

- (8) Laura! Laura! Wake up – I just had the worst nightmare!
 In German and Dutch, the superlative can be used for intensifying purposes as well, cf.:

²⁰ Cf. e.g. Haeseryn et al. (1997: 6.4.3.3 via <http://ans.ruhosting.nl/e-ans/index.html>) "In Dutch (in contrast with some related languages) one does not use the comparative in the sense of 'more or less'. Instead, paraphrases are used" ("In het Nederlands gebruikt men (in tegenstelling tot enkele met het Nederlands verwante talen) de vergrotende trap niet in de betekenis 'min of meer'. In plaats daarvan worden omschrijvingen gebruikt"). E.g. *Ik ben enige tijd weg geweest* 'I have been away for some time' is preferred over *Ik ben langere tijd weg geweest* 'I have been away longer time'.

²¹ Haeseryn et al., *ibid.* These phrases are more or less fixed and are used to denote a specific class of referent (of woman, bookshop). This construction can be seen as a special type of intensification. According to Van der Horst (2008: 1647), it is not known how old this 'absolute' use of the comparative in Dutch is.

²² Expressivity easily occurs as a meaning aspect of superlative intensification. For Italian *-issimo*, Beltrama & Bochnak (2015: 845) claim that this form has "an additional expressive component of meaning". And the use of *worst* in example (8) is also clearly expressive.

- (9) Deswegen mache ich mir die *größten Vorwürfe* unser Glück zerstört zu haben.²³
Therefore make I me the greatest reproaches our luck demolished to have
'Therefore, I seriously accuse myself of having spoiled our happiness'
- (10) Ik maak er me *de grootste zorgen* over dat de tweede pijler de huidige ongelijkheden in de Europese Unie alleen maar groter zal maken.
'I am extremely concerned that the second pillar will create an even more uneven playing field within the European Union than presently exists.'²⁴

Note that in the English translation of this example (taken from a dictionary), the adverbial intensifier *extremely* is used. In Dutch, this use of the superlative is rare. However, if the superlative is prefixed with *aller-*,²⁵ the absolute or intensifying meaning is available both in attributive and predicative constructions (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 6·4·3·4·ii·b·1):

- (11) a. Het is een alleraardigst kind.
It is a all.GEN-nice-st child
'It is a very nice child'
- b. Hij kookt allerberoerdest.
He cooks all.GEN-terrible-st
'He cooks absolutely terribly'

Although we have given examples from English, German, and Dutch, we have to say that it was harder to find intensifying superlative examples for Dutch than for German; in English they seem to be even more rare. This impression fits the statement in the grammar of Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1165), who claim that “[i]n general, forms marked with the inflectional suffix *-est* are not used in the intensifying sense.” As they point out, constructions with *most* are used instead, cf. the following table (2002: 1165):

²³ <http://www.trennungsschmerzen.de/ich-mache-mir-vorwuerfe-kann-sie-nicht-vergessen-t9080.html>.

²⁴ <http://en.bab.la/dictionary/dutch-english/grootste-zorgen>.

²⁵ The prefix *aller-* is a fossilized genitive form of the universal quantifier *al* 'all'.

i	Kim is a [<i>most</i> enthusiastic] supporter	[intensifying]
ii	This one is [<i>most</i> useful]	[superlative or intensifying]
iii	This one is [<i>cheapest</i>]	[superlative only]
iv	You are [<i>most</i> kind]	[intensifying as salient reading]

Table 2. Superlative and intensifying meanings of English superlative forms

They add the following comment to the examples in Table 2: “The *most* of [i], which belongs to a relatively formal style, is an intensifier, a degree adverb meaning approximately ‘highly, very, extremely’. It does not express comparison any more than other intensifiers such as *very*.” Normally, the superlative evokes comparison of different referents, one for which the property holds to the highest degree and others for which it holds to a lesser degree (less enthusiastic supporters). As Huddleston and Pullum show (2002: 1165), it depends on the context whether the *most*+adjective construction takes the ‘literal’ superlative meaning or the ‘derived’ intensifying meaning. “In this case, the two uses of *most* are distinguished by the article, with *a* requiring the intensifying interpretation, *the* the superlative one.”²⁶

Agatha Christie appears to be quite fond of the intensifying use of the construction, as shown in the following examples, taken from *The mysterious affair at styles*:²⁷

- (12) a. “Come for a stroll, Hastings. This has been a *most rotten* business.”
 b. “I say! There's been the *most awful* row! I've got it all out of Dorcas.”
 c. She was a *most generous* woman, and possessed a considerable fortune of her own.

In (12), a and c have the indefinite, b the definite article, so the claim that the article unambiguously leads the way to the superlative or intensifying interpretation seems to require more research.²⁸ Anyway, we can conclude that the English analytic

²⁶ “Superlatives as such reek of definiteness.” (Plank 2003: 370 quoted in Van de Velde 2009: 282).

²⁷ Examples taken from the publicly available version at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/863>.

²⁸ In such a research absence of the determiner could be included as well. In English, *most* without article, like in *most students* receives a quantifier interpretation. In Dutch, an article is present in this context, *de meeste studenten*, although Van de Velde (2009: 282) has found some quantifying uses without article, like in *Meeste kinderen zijn blij dat de lessen weer beginnen* ‘most children are happy that the lessons start again’.

intensifying construction with *most* differs from the German and Dutch synthetic morphological superlative.²⁹

4. Möglich/mogelijk/possible and company

4.1. Simple adjective + möglich/mogelijk/possible

The special intensifying construction we want to discuss here involves a combination of the positive form of the adjective and the modal operator *möglich*, *mogelijk*, *possible*. Examples are given in (13):

- (13)
- a. Zo groot mogelijk
 - b. So groß wie möglich
 - c. As big as possible

Note that German and English have a comparative particle, *wie* and *as* respectively, where Dutch puts the *mogelijk* directly behind the adjective. If this absence of a linking particle can be interpreted as an indication of stronger grammaticalization, then Dutch is in the lead here, not sandwiching between German and English.

This further grammaticalization might also be the explanation for the observation that in Dutch the construction can be used both adverbially and attributively, whereas the latter use is not possible in German and English:

- (14)
- a. Er zijn diverse manieren om een kip *zo snel mogelijk* te doden
'There are various ways to kill a chicken as fast as possible'
 - b. Er zijn diverse manieren om een kip op een *zo snel mogelijke manier* te doden
'There are various ways to kill a chicken in the fastest possible way'
 - c. *Eine so schnell wie mögliche Prozedur
 - d. *An as fast a possible procedure

²⁹ A niche where the Dutch superlative is found for intensifying purposes is the world of advertising. Gas stations and catering services offer *de lekkerste broodjes* 'the best rolls' (e.g. <http://www.lekkerebroodjes.nl/>), carpenters promise to make *de mooiste meubelen* 'the most beautiful furniture' (<http://www.demooistemeubelen.nl/>), etc. This usage is not restricted to Dutch: between 1973 and 2011, Carlsberg beer was advertised as "Probably the best lager in the world." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlsberg_Group).

The fact that the constructions with *mogelijk/möglich/possible* have intensifying meaning can be explained as follows: combined with *zo/so*, the modal meaning leads to an imagined extreme position on a scale, which comes conceptually close to the meaning of a superlative.

4.2. Möglich etc. combined with definite article + superlative

A superlative followed by *möglich*, *mogelijk*, or *possible* leads to a construction that is available in all 3 languages, but there are considerable quantitative and qualitative differences. In German, *möglich* is written as one word with the superlative, for example *bestmöglich* (Europarl), so it looks like an ‘affixoid’. A comparable construction exists in Dutch, but here it is written as two separate words, which might indicate that it is felt to be an analytic form.

- (15)
- a. Der vorgeschlagene Standard EN 1384 ist ein Kompromiß, der nicht den *bestmöglichen* Schutz bietet, wie es die Richtlinie über persönliche Schutzausrüstung fordert.
 - b. De voorgestelde EN 1384norm is een compromis dat niet zorgt voor de *best mogelijke* bescherming, zoals vereist bij de richtlijn persoonlijke beschermingsmiddelen.
 - c. The proposed EN 1384 norm is a compromise which doesn’t guarantee the optimal protection, as required by the guideline regarding personal means of protection.

Moreover, a quantitative difference seems to exist as well. In the Europarl corpus,³⁰ *schnellstmöglich* has 788 hits, whereas *snelst mogelijk* has only 5 hits. A similar tendency can be found with the adjective meaning ‘big’ in the same corpus: *größtmöglich* scored 972 hits versus *grootst mogelijk* 373.

In English, the construction exists too, but it comes in two different word orders (16a-b). Moreover, the modal operator *possible* may even be separated from *way* by another adverbial like *humanly* (16c).

- (16)
- a. The fastest possible way
 - b. The fastest way possible
 - c. The fastest way humanly possible to burn fat

³⁰ <http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/de/corpus/zoek?bereich=EuroParl>.

The cases in (16a-b) are briefly discussed in Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1169): “Besides relative clauses, superlatives take such dependents as *ever*, *imaginable*, *possible*, *practicable*, and *of* phrases indicating the set whose members are compared.” According to Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1169), the b-variant is derived from the a-variant: “The single word dependents are optionally delayed so as to become indirect dependents in the structure of the NP.” This suggests that in cases where the dependents are not single words but larger units, the “delay” may be obligatory. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1169) note, this is indeed the case with *of* phrases: *the largest of all book* is ungrammatical, whereas *the largest book of all* is fine. We assume that the same mechanism has been at work in (16c): *humanly possible* is a modifier of, or a dependent on, the superlative. The canonical position of this dependent would be immediately behind the superlative form, which would yield *the fastest humanly possible way*. Apparently, however, there is some kind of heaviness constraint that makes this word order ungrammatical. The only alternative left, then, is the postponed or delayed version in (16c).

Mogelijk, *möglich*, and *possible* are not the only adverbs that can occur in the construction under discussion, although they are the prototypical members of the paradigm. We will have a short look at alternatives for these items in the three languages. In Dutch, the superlative + *mogelijk* construction appears to be part of a larger (albeit still relatively small) construction network. The following examples show that the modal adverb *mogelijk* ‘possible’ can be replaced by *denkbaar* ‘thinkable’, *voorstelbaar* ‘imaginable’, *haalbaar* ‘feasible’ and *bereikbaar* ‘attainable’:

- (17)
- a. Uitgedost in de *dikst denkbare* jassen
Dressed-up in the thickest thinkable coats
‘dressed in the thickest imaginable coats’
 - b. Eurobonds is de *ergst voorstelbare* oplossing voor deze crisis³¹
‘Eurobonds is the worst imaginable solution for this crisis’
 - c. De *hoogst bereikbare* vorm van eentonigheid³²
‘The highest attainable form of monotonicity

³¹ www.iex.nl.

³² Kees Fens, www.volkskrant.nl, 09/09/1996.

- d. Haal het vlees uit de vriezer. Met een vlijmscherp mes de *dunst haalbare* plakjes afsnijden.³³
Get the meat out of the freezer. With a razor-sharp knife the thinnest feasible slices cut off
'Get the meat out of the freezer. Cut with a razor-sharp knife the thinnest slices feasible'

English as well allows for a few more adjectives in this construction: Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1169) mention *possible*, *imaginable*, as in *What is the greatest number imaginable* and *The best hospitality imaginable*, and *practicable*, as in *At the earliest practicable opportunity*;³⁴ cf. the discussion above under (16).

In German, we see similar alternatives for *möglich* as in Dutch, namely *denkbar*, *vorstellbar* and *erreichbar*:

- (18) a. *Schönst vorstellbarer* Strand und tolle Landschaft.
Beautiful-est imaginable beach and nice landscape
'most beautiful beach imaginable and stunning surroundings'
b. das *schlechtest denkbare* Szenario
the bad-est thinkable scenario
'the worst scenario imaginable'
c. *Höchst erreichbare* Punktzahl
Highest attainable point-count
'Maximal score'

The German variant of this intensifying construction has some other remarkable features. The first one is that the superlative adjective and *möglich*, *denkbar* etc. often switch order:³⁵

- (19) a. Erkältung zum *denkbar schlechtesten* Zeitpunkt! Brauche Sofort-Hilfe!³⁶
'The flue at a most unwelcome moment! Need direct help!'

³³ <http://www.c-c-n.nl/recepten/ccn%20bokaal%202010/Menu%20en%20receptuur%20Enschede%201.%20voorrondes%202010.pdf>.

³⁴ <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/practicable>.

³⁵ Given the goal of this paper, we will refrain here from trying to come up with a syntactic analysis.

³⁶ <http://forum.glamour.de>.

- b. Gute Küche, leider mit dem *denkbar schlechtesten* Service³⁷
'Good kitchen, unfortunately with very bad service'
- c. ich habe das Problem jetzt auf die *denkbar hässlichste* Variante gelöst³⁸
'I have solved the problem now in the most ugly way'
- d. Das *denkbar schönste* Weihnachtsgeschenk der Welt³⁹
'The most beautiful Christmas present of the world'
- e. Die *vorstellbar schönste* Szene sind Gesichter
'The most beautiful scene is faces'
- f. Man treibe vielmehr die Pferde an und setze sie in die *möglich schnellste* Gangart.
'Rather, one spurs on the horses and puts them in the highest speed'

According to Google, *schlechtest denkbar* is outnumbered by *denkbar schlechtest*, and the same holds for various other adjectives used in these patterns:

schönst denkbare	58
denkbar schönste	11300
hässlichst denkbare	0
denkbar hässlichste	104
schlechtest denkbare	4190
denkbar schlechteste	59800

Table 3. Word order in German intensified forms with *denkbar* + superlative (Google counts, 07/01/2013)

The word order shift leads to a position for *denkbar*, *möglich* etc. which is similar to the regular adverbial intensifier position. This way, the phrase is immediately recognizable as an intensifying construction, which might have contributed to its frequent use.⁴⁰

³⁷ www.tripadvisor.de.

³⁸ www.golatex.de.

³⁹ <http://community.zeit.de>.

⁴⁰ Heide Wegener pointed out to us that *denkbar* also occurs with simple adjectives, as in *Die Ausgangslage für diese Konsultationen ist denkbar schlecht* (europarl via <http://www.linguee.de/deutsch-english/uebersetzung/denkbar+schlecht.html>). Note that *denkbar* is interpreted as an intensifying in this construction as well, witness the translation *Things look very bad as we move into these consultations*.

Secondly, in particular in relation to *möglich*, the superlative morpheme can shift from the adjective to *möglich*, cf. (20):

- (20) Wie kann ich *möglichst schnell* 20 kilo abnehmen?
 ‘How can I lose 20 kilos as soon as possible?’

Whereas combinations like *möglichst schnell* give many hits on Google, *denkbarst schnell* leads to only four hits, for example:

- (21) Man fühlt sich als ein am Kampf Beteiligter und wünscht sich nichts mehr, als dass der Einsatz *denkbarst schnell* und mit so wenigen Verlusten wie möglich zu Ende geht.⁴¹
 ‘One feels as someone who is involved in the fight and one only wishes that the the attack will end as soon as possible and with the fewest possible losses’

A similar shift can be observed when *möglich* occurs as an affixoid, see (22):

- (22) a. *baldestmöglich*
 b. *baldmöglichst*

The prototype status of German *möglich* within the list of alternatives in the constructional network thus not only shows in the fact that it is often written as one word with the adjective, but also in the possible shift of the superlative morpheme.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored some means of intensification in English, Dutch, and German. In particular, we have looked at the difference in the choice between adverbial, compound, and prefixoid intensification (section 2), comparative and superlative forms (section 3), and specific constructions like the one with *possible* etc. (section 4). The general picture is that the three languages all use these forms for intensifying purposes, with some differences in preferences. These preferences tend to follow the Germanic sandwich cline, although deviations are observed as well, like in the case of *as Adj as possible*, and its German and Dutch counterparts, where Dutch shows a stronger internal integration of the construction. A more systematic comparison, both on the level of the language system and on the level of language

⁴¹ http://www.ciao.de/Black_Hawk_Down_Test_2278491.

use, would be the next step. The goal of this first exploration was to provide some indications as to which aspects are interesting for such a further investigation of Germanic similarities, differences, and clines in the domain of intensification.

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