The ultra-super fixed word order of stacked intensifying prefixoids in English, French, and Dutch

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Prefixes such as *ultra-*, *super-*, *mega-*, and *hyper-* modify the input semantics of their bases by indicating an extreme degree (Plag 2018), acting as augmentatives that signal size, value, or quality exceeding a norm (Bauer et al. 2015). While single prefixoids suggest functional interchangeability (*mega-rich*, *super-rich*, *ultra-rich*), speakers frequently stack multiple prefixoids to express heightened extravagant or pleonastic evaluation. Extravagant language use frequently relies on structural redundancy and pleonastic stacking (Ungerer & Hartmann 2020; Eitelmann & Haumann 2022). Evaluative morphology provides an ideal testing ground for this phenomenon, given its inherent susceptibility to pleonastic reinforcement (Lehmann 2005). However, it remains unclear whether prefixoid stacking is governed by random expressive choices or by rigid, cross-linguistic structural constraints.

Drawing on web-scale corpora – enTenTen21, frTenTen23, and nlTenTen20 – this study investigates the combinatorial possibilities, linear ordering, and structural-semantic behaviour of four universal prefixoids (*ultra-*, *super-*, *mega-*, *hyper-*) across English, French, and Dutch. Specifically, I explore whether universal word-order hierarchies exist across these languages, which combinations are systematically preferred or avoided, and how structural variables interact with semantic-pragmatic evaluation.

To map these patterns, frequency distributions (hits per million tokens) were extracted across all twelve possible pairwise combinations. Combinations reaching a threshold of at least 0.01 hits per million tokens are qualitatively and quantitatively analysed, sampling 50 instances per language (yielding a dataset of 1050 noise-free occurrences). Using Chi-square tests and language-specific conditional inference trees in R, I evaluate several key predictors, including (1) orthographic attachment (solid, hyphenated, or separate), (2) base category (noun, adjective, adverb, verb, or complex/recursive base), (3) base length, (4) evaluative trajectory (meliorative, pejorative, or neutral connotation), and (5) recursive context (occurrence within larger prefixoid chains).

Preliminary corpus findings reveal strict ordering restrictions across all three languages. Certain combinations are virtually non-existent (e.g., *ultra-hyper*, *mega-ultra*, *mega-hyper*), demonstrating that word order in prefixoid stacking is strongly constrained. Notably, *hyper-* functions almost exclusively as the second element in a sequence, showing high structural restriction in English and Dutch, though slightly more positional flexibility in French. Conversely, language-specific preferences emerge: Dutch displays a particularly strong bias for *mega-super* – which functions as a classic pleonastic construction – whereas French and Dutch both favor *super-mega* as a dominant pattern.

Qualitative analysis further confirms that these stacked prefixoids are deliberately deployed for rhetorical impact and stylistic exaggeration. These chains predominantly appear in highly expressive contexts (e.g., ex. 1–5). By examining how structural properties, base selection, and pragmatic connotation interact, this paper provides a novel, comparative perspective on the constraints governing stacked evaluative morphology across Germanic and Romance languages.

Examples

(1) *[…] overigens een gigantische* ***mega ultra*** *spoiler.* (nlTenTen20)
(2) *[…] il fesais* ***hyper mega*** *froid !* (frTenTen23)
(3) *[…] sont* ***mega ultra*** *giga silencieu delamorkitu …* (frTenTen23)
(4) *[…] Republicans could fracture and marginalize themselves by going just completely* ***ultra-mega****-stupid-whacky-far-right.* (enTenTen21)
(5) *NO one will buy 3-5m a piece even if it is super duper* ***ultra mega*** *rare.* (enTenTen21)

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