Ordinals and Superlatives

1. Absolute/Comparative Ambiguity
Both superlatives and ordinals give rise to absolute and comparative readings ([1–3]).

(1) John gave Mary the oldest telescope.
   a. John gave Mary the telescope older than other telescopes. (Absolute)
   b. John gave Mary a telescope before other people did. (Comparative)

2. Focus Sensitivity
Comparative readings are focus sensitive for both superlatives and ordinals ([1]).

(3) a. John gave Mary the oldest telescope.
   b. John gave Mary a telescope before other people did.

3. Non-Modal Subject Infinitives (NMSIs)
Ordinals and superlatives both license non-modal subject infinital clauses ([1,4,2]).

(a) (John bought) the oldest telescope to be made.
   b. (John bought) the first telescope to be made.
   c. (John gave Mary) the oldest telescope to be given to Mary.

A modal infinital clause like (6) receives a ‘futurate’ interpretation (e.g. the telescope what is being/planned to be made). The sentences in (5) have non-futurate readings. (NB: Both ordinals and superlatives are compatible with modal subject infinital clauses too, so subject infinital clauses are inherently ambiguous. Fortunately, modal interpretations can be pragmatically excluded in certain contexts, e.g. [10,1].) [1] observes that non-modal subject infinital clauses make both superlatives and ordinals focus insensitive.

(7) a. John (gave) Mary (the) oldest telescope to be made.
   b. John (gave) Mary (the) first telescope to be made.

Ordinals and Superlatives

1. Absolute/Comparative Ambiguity
Both superlatives and ordinals give rise to absolute and comparative readings ([1–3]). However, there is a crucial difference between superlatives and ordinals: ordinals don’t give rise to upstarts de dicto readings.

(8) Context: John, Bill and Fred are ignorant about one another.
   a. John wants to take a train between 3 pm and 4 pm.
   b. Bill wants to take a train between 5 pm and 6 pm.
   c. Fred wants to take a train between 7 pm and 8 pm.

John wants to take the earlist train.
   a. true (in (8))
   b. false or # in (8)

Movement Theory of Superlatives
Movement theory postulates covert movement of -est to account for upstarts de dicto readings (see [9] for a different view).

(10) \[ \text{if} \quad (C(P_{dpl}(x), k)) \text{ is defined only if} \]
    \[ \quad \forall y \in C : P_d(y) = T. \]
    \[ \text{wherever defined, denotes} \]
    \[ \quad \exists z : P_d(z) = T \quad \land \quad \forall y \in C : (x = y) = (P_d(y) = T). \]

If ordinals move in the same manner, as suggested by [1–3], they should also give rise to upstarts de dicto readings, contrary to fact. Thus we’ll pursue an alt analysis.

Temporal Properties of NMSIs

4. NMSI Force Temporal Ordering
[4] points out that non-modal subject infinital clauses determine the ordering.

(11) Context: There is a pile of five books. Some of the books were published in 2013.
   b. Book B: published in August 2013
   c. Book C: published in December 2012
   d. Book D: published in March 2013
   e. Book E: published in January 2013

For (12a), the ordering must be the order of publication, i.e. the order in which the infinital clause is true. For (12b) the ordering can be determined contextually.

5. NMSI and NP Must Temporally Overlap
[1] observes that the NP and infinital clause must temporally overlap, e.g. (13) implies that the person in question walked on the moon at the age of 80.

(13) I met the second 80 year old to walk on the moon.

(NB: [1,4] claim that NMSIs cannot temporally follow the matrix clause, but we do not find convincing evidence for this generalisation, due largely to the ambiguity between modal and non-modal readings. Details are omitted here.)

Conclusions and Further Issues
The absolute/analytical ambiguity does not motivate covert movement contra [1,2]; with [8,9], but the availability of upstarts de dicto readings does for superlatives.

It is expected that our account of CC extends to superlatives and nominal only, both of which license NMSIs.

References: