

A superlative argument in favor of a semantic account of connectivity sentences

Nutshell In this paper, we offer a novel argument supporting a semantic account (SemA) of connectivity sentences like (1) against its main competitor, Syn(tactic)A(ccount).

(1) What John/everyone likes is himself_F

The argument is based on Romance data where superlative import requires relativization. It boils down to what follows. Under SynA, there is a conflict between the assumed syntax of the post-copular clause and its interpretation. That is, the structural configuration that SynA requires to satisfy Binding cannot generate the desired superlative interpretation. We show that this problem does not arise for SemA, which maintains that variable binding does not require c-command and can therefore straightforwardly derive the correct meaning.

We also extend the analysis to question-answer pairs, which are not discussed here for space reason.

The two competing approaches According to SynA (see Ross 1972, den Dikken and Wilder 2000, Schlenker 2003, Romero 2007 Romero 2018 a.o), a connectivity sentence such as (1) displays the same behavior as a simple sentence like (2) w.r.t. to a variety of syntactic tests (binding in this case) simply because at some level of representation (1) contains a connected clause like (2), which is then partially elided (as shown in (3)) .

(2) John/everyone likes himself

The “question plus deletion (Q+D)” account for example maintains that in (1) a concealed question (denoted by the specificational subject and analyzed as in Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984) is equated to the strengthened value of the elided answer (the post-copular constituent).

(3) $\llbracket \text{ANS What John likes is } \cancel{\text{John likes himself}} \rrbracket$
= $\lambda w [\lambda w'. \iota x [\text{like}(j,x,w')]] = \iota x [\text{like}(j,x,w)] = \lambda w'. \text{like}(j,j,w')$ & *John likes nobody else in w'*]
‘We are in a world w such that: the exhaustive answer to the question “what does John like” in w is the proposition “that John likes himself (and nobody else)”’.

Unlike SynA, SemA (Jacobson 1994, Sharvit 1999, Cecchetto 2000 a.o.) does not take Binding (Scope or NPI licensing) to require a structural condition like c-command. No elided structure needs therefore to be posited in the post-copular constituents. Connectivity instead results from a higher-order semantics, as shown in (4). The reflexive is analyzed as in Sharvit (1999). The quantified example in (1) then denotes the equation between the unique function that maps everyone to what they like and the function that maps everyone to himself.

(4) $\lambda w. \iota f_{\langle e,e \rangle} [\forall x. \text{like}(x,f(x),w)] = \lambda x. x$

The challenging Data We offer a novel argument that strongly supports SemA against SynA. It comes from Italian connectivity sentences such as (5), in which the specificational subject has the following properties. (i) It is a definite relative clause that embeds (what looks like) a comparative and has a resulting superlative interpretation and (ii) relativization is necessary in order to get superlative import. That is, the same predicate at the sentential level is incompatible with a superlative reading and can only have a comparative interpretation (as shown in (6)). Similar examples can be constructed in other Ibero-Romance languages and to some limited extent in French (see Loccioni 2018 and Rohena-Madrado 2007 for discussion).

- (5) La persona con cui Maria è più esigente è se stessa
 The person with whom Maria is more demanding is herself
 ‘The person with whom Maria is the most demanding is herself’
- (6) Maria è più esigente con se stessa
 Maria is more demanding with herself
 ‘Maria is {more/*the most} demanding with herself’

The connected sentence in (6) is shown to lack a superlative interpretation. Yet, it is exactly what SynA would take the post-copular (elided) clause in (5) to be, as shown in (7). This treatment would obviously fail to generate the correct interpretation. Under a Q+D account *à la* Romero/Schlenker in fact (5) would say that the exhaustive answer to the question “who is the person with whom Maria is the most demanding” is the proposition “that Maria is more demanding with herself”. It is unclear how the strengthened value of the connected sentence (its normal value *plus* its implicature) could result in the correct interpretation.

- (7) [la persona con cui Maria è più esigente] è
 [the person with whom Maria is most demanding] is
 [~~Maria è più esigente con se stessa~~]
 [Maria is more demanding with herself]

Since according to SemA variable binding does not require c-command, the same problem does not arise and the right interpretation for (5) can be straightforwardly generated. This is sketched in (8). Under this treatment, (5) denotes the equation between the unique function that returns the person Mary is the most demanding with and the function that associates everyone to himself.

- (8) $\lambda w. \iota f_{\langle e, e \rangle} [[\text{Maria}] [\lambda x. \exists d. \text{demanding}(x, f(x), d, w) \ \& \ \forall g(x)[g(x) \in C \ \& \ g(x) \neq f(x) \rightarrow \neg \text{demanding}(x, g(x), d, w)]] = \lambda x. x$

References

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