

Minimal Pronouns

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In this talk, I will revisit some of the issues surrounding bound variable readings of 1st and 2nd person pronouns, as illustrated in (1):

- (1) I'm the only one around here who will admit that I could be wrong.
Partee (1989)

In (1), the second occurrence of *I* can have a strict and a bound variable interpretation. On the bound variable interpretation, which is the one we are interested in here, (1) implies that nobody else around here will admit that they themselves could be wrong.

In recent lectures at the École Normale Supérieure, Irene Heim observed that the second occurrence of the 1st person pronoun in the German translation (2) of Partee's sentence can only have a strict interpretation:

- (2) Ich bin hier die einzige, die zuzugeben bereit ist, dass ich unrecht habe.
I am here the only one who to admit ready is that I wrong am.
Heim (2005)

That German and English should differ with respect to a remote phenomenon like the availability of a bound variable interpretation for *I* is puzzling. Even more puzzling is the fact that German pronouns do not show uniform behavior with respect to sentences like (1):

- (3) Wir sind hier die einzigen, die zuzugeben bereit sind, dass wir unrecht haben.
We are here the only ones who to admit ready are that we wrong are.

(3) is exactly like (2), except that instead of the first person singular pronoun *ich*, we have the corresponding plural pronoun *wir*, and number marking in the relative clause has been adjusted accordingly. What is truly surprising is that a bound variable interpretation for the second occurrence of *wir* is easily available in (3). Looking at the behavior of the full paradigm of German pronouns in sentence frames parallel to (2) and (3), we get the pattern displayed in table (1):

	1 st sing	2 nd sing	3 rd sing	1 st pl	2 nd pl	3 rd pl
Bound variable interpretation?	*	*	√	√	*	√

Table 1

As shown in table 1, bound variable interpretations for the second occurrence of the relevant pronouns are possible for the two 3rd person pronouns and for 1st person plural pronouns. What is the generalization behind this puzzling distribution? I think a first step towards understanding the pattern is to take a close look at German verbal paradigms. A general property of German verbal paradigms is that the inflections of 1st person plural and

3rd person plural verbs are always identical, even with irregular verbs and the auxiliaries *haben* and *sein*.

	1 st sing	2 nd sing	3 rd sing	1 st pl	2 nd pl	3 rd pl
have	habe	hast	hat	haben	habt	haben
be	bin	bist	ist	sind	seid	sind
sing	singe	singst	singt	singen	singt	singen

A possible generalization capturing the facts displayed in Table 1 can now be stated as follows:

(4) **Generalization**

A bound variable interpretation for a subject pronoun in a dependent clause S is possible just in case the subject agreement morphology of S is the same as the subject agreement morphology of the clause S depends on.

The same generalization seems to predict corresponding English facts as well. Look at sentence (5), for example:

(5) I am the only one around here who **is** willing to admit that I **am** wrong.

In (5), 3rd person *is* in the relative clause contrasts with 1st person *am* in the sentence it embeds. According to (4), we expect the bound variable reading for the second occurrence of *I* in (5) to be unavailable (or at least harder to obtain than in 1(a)), and this is indeed the case, according to the native speakers I consulted. Why should there be a generalization like (4)? Why should the availability of a bound variable reading for a subject pronoun depend on whether or not the agreement morphology of its verb looks like that of the next higher verb? The strangest aspect of (4) is that it is just the shape of the verbal agreement morphology that counts. It doesn't seem to matter what the actual features are that produce those shapes. Is (4) just the description of a quirk of Germanic grammar, or does it teach us something deep about bound variables in natural languages? Following up on Borer (1989) and Kratzer (1998), I will try to argue for the second - more interesting - possibility in my talk..

References

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