

# snippets

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***The gender of bound variable he***

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Paradigms (1) and (2) are important in work on the interpretation of gender and number features on bound variable pronouns:

- (1) Every professor<sub>i</sub> was decorating his<sub>i</sub>/her<sub>i</sub>/their<sub>i</sub> office.

*female scenario: the professors are presupposed to be female: \*his, √her*

*male scenario: the professors are presupposed to be male: √his, \*her*

*mixed scenario: otherwise: %their, %his*

(Percus 2006; for other studies of the mixed scenario or "epicene" *he*, see Whitley 1978, Mackay 1980, Meyers 1990, Newman 1997, Balhorn 2004, with literature)

- (2) Only the professor<sub>i</sub> was decorating her<sub>i</sub> office.

= The professor, who is female, was decorating her office; and no one else, male or female, was decorating his or her office.

Percus (2006) sets out the situation and develops one current line of analysis:

- (i) In (1), a [fem] feature in the structure with *her* restricts the interpretation to female humans, and for speakers without *his* in the mixed scenario, [masc] does to male humans.
- (ii) For speakers with *his* in the mixed scenario, *his* also occurs in a structure without [masc]; similarly, *their* here cannot be restricted to denoting pluralities.
- (iii) (2) indicates that the gender of bound variable pronouns does not restrict the denotation of the pronouns themselves, since the VP needs to be interpretable as the gender-less predicate *was decorating one's own office*; rather, gender is interpreted on the binder, *the professor*, and the pronoun gets it invisibly to interpretation, say at PF.

However, at least some -- perhaps all -- speakers who accept *his* for the mixed scenario of (1) do not accept analogous uses of *his* in (3) and (4) (cf. Whitley's 1978:20 "not just sexist, but downright bizarre" *Either Hal or Mary sank his teeth into my apple*):

- (3) #Every man and woman<sub>i</sub> was decorating his<sub>i</sub> office.

#Each/#neither spouse<sub>i</sub> signed his<sub>i</sub> name. [excludes women and would use *husband*]

- (4) Contexts: The participants are a mixed group of men and women:

Every participant<sub>i</sub> had to ask another participant<sub>j</sub> if he<sub>j</sub> would be willing to marry him<sub>i</sub>. [excludes heterosexual couplings]

#Every participant<sub>i</sub> had become an uncle or an aunt in his<sub>i</sub> twenties.

#No participant<sub>i</sub> realized that the gene therapy could make him<sub>i</sub> pregnant whether he<sub>i</sub> was a man or an infertile woman.

The examples seem to differ from (1) in that women as well as men are salient among the values ranged over by *he*. The effect is distinct from that in (5), where *his* is barred because the predicate usually restricts the context to women:

(5) No participant<sub>i</sub> had been pregnant in her<sub>i</sub>/#his<sub>i</sub> twenties.

In contrast, speakers who allow *they* in the mixed scenario of (1) do so even when the singularity of its denotata is made salient as in (6). This is reassuring for analyses where plurals in general and the 'epicene' *they* in particular can denote singulars (Sauerland 2008): *they* is allowed in (6) instead of more restrictive singular pronouns, unlike what happens in (5), because it avoids specifying gender, one of its 'distancing' or 'deindividuating' properties discussed in Newman 1997, Balhorn 2004.

(6) {Every participant<sub>i</sub> / No participant<sub>i</sub> / The participants each<sub>i</sub>} claimed that they<sub>i</sub> ate **alone (won, were better than all the others)**.

For the speakers in question, then, bound-variable *his* sometimes can and sometimes cannot be used to denote female humans. This leaves open the analysis. One possibility is to continue with the hypothesis of an interpretively unrestricted *he* and bar it from contexts like (4), for instance if they somehow require the binder to be both [fem] and [masc], transmission of which to a bound variable leaves it unrealizable. Alternatively, *he* might always be interpretively restricted to male humans, as argued in experimental and corpus studies of the mixed scenario (e.g. Mackay and Fulkerson 1979; for other literature see Hellinger 2005) -- these account for mixed uses through androcentric prototypes -- while one might also or alternatively seek a link with "pragmatic slack" phenomena where aspects of meaning like plurality are set aside (Lasersohn 1999, Brisson 2003, Malamud 2012). One boundary condition on analyses, and a possible factor in the variation, is the behaviour of grammatical gender languages like French or Czech, and earlier stages of English: in contexts like (4) in French, pronouns with epicene antecedents like masc. *humain* 'human', fem. *sentinelle* 'guard' agree in gender without any interpretive restrictions, while pronouns with bigender antecedents like masc./fem. *linguiste* 'linguist' do tend to show the effect in (4), restricting masc. pronouns to male humans (cf. also Cacciari et al. 2011).

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