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Covert reciprocity and Strawson-symmetry

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Von Fintel (1999) defines the notion of *Strawson-entailment* and argues that it plays a central role in the analysis of negative polarity items. This squib proposes that so-called covert reciprocity is another phenomenon where Strawson-entailment is at work.

Covert reciprocal nouns are relational nouns whose bare plural forms in predicative position can be interpreted as though they combined with overt reciprocal complements. The equivalence of (1a) and (1b), for example, makes *classmate* a covert reciprocal.

(1) a. They are classmates.
     b. They are classmates of each other.

Other examples of covert reciprocals are *colleague*, *neighbour* and *cousin*. All of these nouns are symmetric: *X is a N of Y* entails *Y is a N of X*. Note that a non-symmetric noun like *fan* is not a covert reciprocal: *They are fans* is not equivalent to *They are fans of each other*. The obvious generalization, then, would seem to be that a relational noun is a covert reciprocal if and only if it is symmetric.

This generalization does not seem to have been questioned in the literature. However, while it may be true that all symmetric relational nouns are covert reciprocals, the reverse is not the case. The sentences in (2) are equivalent, and so the noun *sister* is a covert reciprocal. But sister is clearly not symmetric. *X is a sister of Y* does not entail *Y is a sister of X*, since only the latter sentence conveys that Y is female.

(2) a. They are sisters.
     b. They are sisters of each other.

A revised generalization can be based on von Fintel's (1999) notion of Strawson-entailment. ϕ Strawson-entails φ if and only if the conjunction of ϕ and the presupposition of φ entails φ. Extending the terminology, we can define a relational noun N to be *Strawson-symmetric* just in case *X is a N of Y* Strawson-entails *Y is a N of X*. The revised generalization, then, is that a relational noun is a covert reciprocal if and only if it is Strawson-symmetric.

The definition of Strawson-symmetry guarantees that every symmetric predicate is also Strawson-symmetric, so the revised generalization still applies correctly to symmetric predicates like *classmate*. Moreover, assuming that the gender information carried by *sister* is presupposed, *sister* is Strawson-symmetric: in conjunction with the assumption that Y is female, *X is a sister of Y* indeed entails *Y is a*

sister of X. Therefore, assuming that *sister* presupposes its gender information, the revised generalization accommodates all the relevant cases.

The assumption that *sister* presupposes its gender information is not implausible. The sentences in (3) seem to convey that Kim is a female, suggesting that the gender information carried by *sister* projects much like typical presuppositions do.

(3) a. Kim isn't his sister.
     b. Perhaps Kim is his sister.
     c. Is Kim his sister?

In English, *sister* and its companion *brother* (and perhaps *husband* and *wife*) may be the only relational nouns that only a presupposition stops from being symmetric. But the amended generalization proposed here is likely to apply more widely in languages where gender information is routinely encoded through morphological means.

References
von Fintel, K. (1999) "NPI-licensing, Strawson-Entailment, and context dependency." *Journal of Semantics* 16: 97-148
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