

snippets

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Contents

1. Paul Marty. *A note on non-distributive belief ascriptions.*
2. Gesoel Mendes and Marta Ruda. *First conjunct agreement in Polish: Evidence for a mono-clausal analysis.*

A note on non-distributive belief ascriptions

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Pasternak (2018) observes that it is possible to truthfully attribute to a plurality a belief that cannot be truthfully attributed to any of its atomic parts. The example in (1) (Pasternak's (4)) illustrates this observation. Crucially, the interpretation that makes (1) true in the suggested context cannot be a distributive one, nor can it be accounted for via a *de re* construal of 'six houses'.

- (1) *Context: Sam owns a construction company and has six clients, none of whom know of the others' existence. She has convinced each client that she would build a house for him. In reality, she is a con artist and built no houses at all.*
(In total,) Sam's clients believe that [she built six houses]

Based on these and related observations, Pasternak proposes that the possibility of non-distributive belief ascriptions follows from the fact that the beliefs of a plurality can generally be inferred from the beliefs of its atomic parts: when the beliefs of the atomic parts composing a plurality are mutually compatible, the beliefs of that plurality correspond to the conjunction of the beliefs of its atomic parts. This proposal nicely accounts for the case in (1): since each client believes that Sam built a house for him, their conjoined belief is that she built six houses.

As a follow up to Pasternak's observations, consider now the following variants of (1) and assume that Bill and John are Sam's only two clients:

- (2) a. Bill believes that [Sam is from Texas]_p
b. John believes that [Sam is a hard worker]_q
c. Sam's clients believe that [she is from Texas and she is a hard worker]_{p and q}
- (3) a. Bill believes that [Sam is from Texas and she is a hard worker]_{p and q}
b. John isn't sure that [Sam is from Texas]_p and he isn't sure that [she is a hard worker]_q
c. Sam's clients believe that [she is from Texas and she is a hard worker]_{p and q}
- (4) a. Bill believes that [Sam is from Texas]_p
b. John believes that [if Sam is from Texas, then she is a hard worker]_{if p, then q}
c. Sam's clients believe that [she is from Texas and she is a hard worker]_{p and q}

In these three examples, Sam's clients' individual beliefs are mutually compatible and their conjoined beliefs entail *p and q*. Yet people can truthfully attribute to Sam's clients the belief that *p and q* is true only in (2c). Intuitively, (3c) and (4c) are not acceptable because, in contrast to (2c), one of the individual experiencers, namely John, does not believe any of the non-trivial entailments of *p and q*: in both (3) and (4), John is agnostic about *p*, about *q*, and thus about *p and q*.

These contrasts suggest that, for a belief to be truthfully attributed to a plurality, it is necessary but not sufficient that the believed proposition be entailed by the conjoined beliefs of the corresponding individuals. Rather non-distributive belief ascription seems to require not only that every non-trivial entailment of the relevant proposition be believed by some part of the relevant plurality, but also that every part of that plurality believes some non-trivial entailment of that proposition. Both these requirements are met in (1) and (2), but only the former is met in (3) and (4).

Overall, these observations are reminiscent of the dual requirement at work in cumulative readings and may invite us to envision non-distributive belief ascriptions as particular instances of phrasal cumulativity interacting with attitudinal semantics. Arguably, one could try to account for this phenomenon using similar mechanisms as those previously proposed for deriving the cumulative readings of sentences involving more than one plural DPs, e.g., by appealing to and adapting the cumulativity ****-operator proposed in Beck and Sauerland 2000 (see Schmitt 2017 for a recent proposal). As far as I can tell, an analysis along these lines would capture the contrasts unveiled in this note and naturally extend to cases involving other attitude verbs like ‘want’, which has been shown in Pasternak 2018 to allow non-distributive desire ascriptions.

References

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