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Modal adverbs and constraints on type-flexibility

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A traditional view holds that and is ambiguous between the meanings in (1), among others:

\[ \lambda p, \lambda q. \lambda w. p \land q \]
\[ \lambda Q_{t, t}, \lambda Q'_{t, t}, \lambda f_{t, t}. \lambda w. (Q(f))(Q'(f)) \]

Possibly precedes the vP in (2a), and a DP in (2b). Bogal-Allbritten (2013, 2014) observed that these are truth-conditionally distinct: unlike (2a), (2b) has an existential entailment that Mary climbed something. The contrast replicates in (3) with the DP being an existential quantifier.

(2) a. Mary possibly climbed the tallest mountain in Ireland (TMI).
   “It is possible Mary climbed the TMI.”
   b. Mary climbed possibly the tallest mountain in Ireland.
   “Mary climbed something, which possibly was the TMI.”

(3) a. Mary possibly climbed something.
   “It’s possible Mary climbed something.”
   b. #Mary climbed possibly something.
   “Mary climbed something, which possibly was something.”

Possibly denotes (4), and in (2a) adjoins to the vP, as in (5). Percus (2000) observed that verbal predicates are interpreted relative to the most local intensional operator. (5) therefore conveys that for some w’ epistemically-accessible from w_0, Mary climbed at w’ the TMI at w’ (if the DP is likewise interpreted relative to the modal). Rightly, no actual climbing is entailed.

(4) \[ \lambda p, \lambda w. \exists w' \in EPI(w) [p(w')] \]
   (type <st,st>)

(5) \[ [vP possibly [vP Mary climbed the tallest mountain in Ireland]] \]

In (2b), Bogal-Allbritten proposes that climb is outside the scope of possibly, and thus interpreted by default relative to the actual world, yielding an existential entailment. One route involves hidden syntax: possibly takes low propositional scope in a covert relative clause:

(6) \[ [vP [DP \exists [RC Op \lambda 2 [possibly [t_2 <was> the TMI]]]] \lambda 1 [vP Mary climbed t_1]] \]
Yet, with type-shifting, (2b) should allow another parse. The Geach Rule applied to an operator of type $< \alpha, \beta >$ is (7). Through the Geach Rule, $[\text{possibly}]$ may shift to $[\text{possibly}_2]$ in (8), which composes with a quantifier, analogously to $[\text{and}_2]$. To illustrate, I here assume an intensional semantics where every type $t$ in an extensional system is replaced by $<s,t>$ so quantifiers are type $<\text{est},\text{st}>$.

$$[\text{possibly}_2] = \lambda_{\text{est},\text{st}}. \lambda_{\text{est}}. [\text{possibly}](Q(f)) \quad \text{(type $<\text{est},\text{st}>,<\text{est},\text{st}>>$)}$$

Now, $\text{possibly}$ composes directly with the DP, in this case itself lifted to quantifier type in (9) (Partee 1987). $\text{Possibly DP}$ is a new quantifier, and scopes at the vP in (10). Per (11), $\text{climb}$ is again in the semantic scope of $\text{possibly}$, and a meaning equivalent to (5) results. If this derivation were attested, (2b), like (2a), would have a parse with no existential entailment.

$$[\text{the TMI}^\uparrow] = \lambda_{\text{est},\text{w}}. f(t_x \{x \text{ is the TMI in w}\})(w)$$

(10) $[\text{vP [DP possibly}_2 \text{ the tallest mountain in Ireland}] \lambda_1 [\text{vP Mary climbed t}_1]]$

(11) a. $[\text{possibly}_2]([\text{the TMI}^\uparrow])(\lambda x.\lambda w. \text{Mary climbed x in w})$

b. $= [\text{possibly}](\lambda w. \text{Mary climbed in w t}_x \{x \text{ is the TMI in w}\})$

Why is $[\text{possibly}_2]$ not freely available? If the Geach shift exists in grammar, further constraints are required. A flexible semantics may, for instance, be coupled with a syntactic constraint to block $\text{possibly}$ from adjoining to a DP. On the other hand, the puzzle might suggest that type-flexibility is not available (as in e.g. Heim 2017, Sauerland 2018, Hirsch 2017, 2018; see also Schein 2017 on re-analysis of $\text{and}$). Heim and Sauerland formulate economy principles which effectively disallow Geach because it introduces $\lambda$-binders, but no new contentful predicate. Then, $\text{possibly}$ is rigidly interpreted with its lexical meaning, $[\text{possibly}]$, and the data follow from the semantics.

References


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