snippets

Issue 37 - December 2019
Special issue in honor of Uli Sauerland

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Why *them*?

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7358/snip-2019-037-romo

Sauerland (2003) has introduced the influential idea that the meaning of the Plural is vacuous, simply passing up the meaning it combines with, (1), in contrast with its singular counterpart, presupposing atomicity, (2). This proposal has sparked a lot of work in the literature based on this assumption about the Plural (Sauerland et al. 2005; Spector 2007; Ivlieva 2013; Zweig 2009; Mayr 2015 a.o.).

(1) $[\![\text{PL}]\!] = \lambda x.\ x$

(2) $[\![\text{SG}]\!] = \lambda x : |x| = 1\ .\ x$

The proposal above nicely captures the multiplicity inference of sentences like (3), arising from a *Maximize Presupposition!* (MP) competition with its singular counterpart in (4) (Heim 1991 a.o.).

(3) There are bathrooms on this floor. $\rightsquigarrow$ *There are multiple bathrooms on this floor.*

(4) There is a bathroom on this floor.

In addition, it correctly predicts this inference to disappear under negation, given the assumption that MP does not apply if it weakens the overall meaning of the sentence.

(5) There are no bathrooms on this floor. $\Rightarrow$ *There isn't any bathroom on this floor.*

Finally, this proposal can be extended to plural referential pronouns, according to which a pronoun like *they* is also analysed as in (6).

(6) $[\![\text{they}_i]\!]^g = [\![\text{PL}]\!]^g(g(i))$

According to (6), *they* does not require a plural referent, but it is felicitous as long as its singular counterpart is not assertable. Sauerland (2003) provides arguments in support of this analysis, against an alternative approach according to which *they* would always need a plural antecedent.

In this note, I want to add another argument for (6). As a first step building the argument, consider (7).

(7) There are bathrooms on this floor. The architect put **them** in a funny place.

(7) is unproblematic for both approaches, because the plural noun in the first sentence can be interpreted as entailing that there is more than one bathroom (regardless of how this is derived) thereby serving as a plural antecedent for *them* in the second sentence. Consider (8), on the other hand, adapted from the famous example by Barbara Partee given in (9), which uses a singular noun in the first disjunct and the singular pronoun *it* in the second one.

(8) Either there are no bathrooms on this floor, or the architect put **them**/??**it** in a funny place.

(9) Either there is no bathroom on this floor, or the architect put **it**/??**them** in a funny place.

In order to obtain the intuitively correct interpretation for the first disjunct of (8), the plural noun cannot be interpreted as entailing multiple bathrooms. The meaning of the first disjunct would otherwise be too weak. The sentence would have the meaning in (10) and it would be true if there is only one bathroom even if it's not true that the architect put it in a funny place.

(10) Either there aren't multiple bathrooms on this floor, or the architect put them in a funny place.

Assuming that the local context of the second disjunct entails the negation of the first one (see Schlenker 2008 and references therein), it would only entail that there are one or more bathrooms on this floor. This is not enough to license the plural pronoun in an approach requiring *them* to always have a plural referent. In Sauerland's (2003) account, however, there is no problem: *them* is allowed, as long as its singular counterpart isn't, which is intuitively correct, as shown in (9).

In sum, (8) constitutes another argument for the meaning in (6), supporting an approach to the semantics of the plural like the one defended in Sauerland 2003.

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