On Compulsory Binding and Strict Readings

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A prominent line of research on pronominal binding argues for the existence of what we may call COMPULSORY BINDING: Rule I of Grodzinsky & Reinhart 1993 enforces binding over coreference when the two are semantically equivalent, Rule H of Fox 2000 enforces local binding over semantically equivalent nonlocal binding, and Have Local Binding! of Büring 2005 enforces both. Here I refine an observation regarding the potential for such approaches to overgenerate strict readings under ellipsis.

Compulsory binding must be paired with a theory of ellipsis that licenses strict readings in the presence of a bound correspondent in the antecedent. For (1), compulsory binding holds that *his* must be bound by *John*; the availability of a strict reading means that the elided *his* need not be bound in parallel by *Bill*.

(1) $John_i$ loves his_i mother, and $Bill_j$ does too.

Fox and Büring attribute the strict reading in (1) to a principle Fox calls Referential Parallelism, which licenses ellipsis of a pronoun whose referential value is identical to that of its correspondent in the ellipsis antecedent. The referential value of a bound correspondent is that of its (referential) binder (*John*, in (1)). Quite generally, then, this approach predicts thoroughgoing strict/sloppy ambiguity for bound pronouns with referential antecedents.

When such a referential antecedent is in focus, binding and coreference come apart semantically. As Roelofsen 2010 observes, in such circumstances binding in the ellipsis antecedent licenses only a sloppy reading. Roelofsen demonstrates this with *only*, but the effect is quite general. I add an example with a relative superlative.

(2)   Yesterday, only $[Bob_i]_F$ called his_i mother. Today, only $[Max_j]_F$ did.   (Roelofsen 2010:126)

(3)   Of all the climbers, $[John_i]_F$ climbed the highest mountain in his_i state. Mary thought that $[Bill_j]_F$ did.

In (2), when the first clause is read to mean that Bob was yesterday's only own-mother-caller (binding), the second clause cannot mean that Max was today's only Bob's-mother-caller (strict). Likewise in (3), when the first clause is read to mean that John achieved the greatest height-of-mountain-climbed-in-own-state, the second clause cannot mean that Mary thought that Bill achieved the greatest height-of-mountain-climbed-in-John's-state.

The worry for compulsory binding is as follows: when the ellipsis antecedent contains a bound pronoun whose antecedent is a referential phrase, both strict and sloppy identity must be licensed,

as in (1). But when that bound pronoun's referential antecedent is in focus, only sloppy identity is available. Why should the presence of focus eliminate the strict reading? The viability of compulsory binding depends on a satisfactory answer to this question.

Heim 2009 observes that the constituent that binds the pronoun in such cases is not the referential phrase itself but the larger constituent consisting of this phrase plus a focus morpheme. This yields the following LF for the relevant portion of (3):

(4) $[[John_1]_F] \lambda 2\ t_2$ climbed a d-tall mountain in his_2 state

To rule out a strict reading here, Referential Parallelism must fail: the semantic value of the constituent *[[John_1]_F]*, which binds *his_2*, must be distinct from that of *John_1*.

Is it plausible to suggest that such a semantic distinction holds? In the tradition of Rooth 1992, the focus feature/morpheme does not contribute to the calculation of ordinary semantic values. What I hope to have clarified here is that compulsory binding requires just such a semantic distinction—or an entirely different theory of ellipsis licensing—on pain of overgenerating strict readings quite broadly.

References

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