A Note on Choice Functions in Context

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1.   The Issue

Kratzer 1998 proposes that certain indefinite determiners (at least in some of their uses) might be variables for (Skolemized) choice functions that receive a value from the utterance context. What does it mean for a choice function variable to receive a value from the context of utterance? How can a context provide such a function? To sharpen intuitions, here is an example describing a custom from my home town Mindelheim. After every funeral, all the mourners gathered around the still open grave say a prayer that starts with the words: "And now let us pray for the person among us who will die next." Suppose an anthropologist attended one or more funerals in Mindelheim, and reports on what she found out in a lecture using (1), or the more general (2):

(1)   After the funeral, the mourners prayed for **some** (particular) person among them.

(2)   After every funeral in Mindelheim, the mourners pray for **some** (particular) person among them.

On a referential theory of "some", the anthropologist's utterance of "some" refers to a particular method of picking out the person prayed for. In our case, that method is a function that assigns to every funeral in Mindelheim that person among those who attend the funeral who will die next. (For the sake of our example, you might assume that there are provisions for simultaneous deaths.) If the anthropologist understood what was going on at the funeral, she knew what the method for picking the person prayed for was. But if she reports what she found out as (1) or (2) in her lectures, her students might no longer have that piece of information. Yet they, too, might report what they learned by uttering (1) or (2), still referring to the very same method established in Mindelheim.

## 2.	Conclusions from the funeral example

The funeral example suggests that reference to choice functions seems to work like other cases of reference: The mourners establish the method, the anthropologist's use of "some" refers to the method established by the mourners, the students' uses of "some" refer to the method referred to by their professor, etc. We have chains of reference, then. Consequently, a person can successfully refer to a choice function without necessarily knowing what that choice function is. And even if she knows what the function is, that all by itself doesn't imply that she knows what the actual individual is that the function picks out. This is the situation of the mourners in Mindelheim. They establish a method for picking out somebody among them. They don't know who is picked out by that method.

## 3.	Matthewson 1999

Matthewson 1999 objects to Kratzer's contextualist account of wide-scope indefinites on the following grounds:

"There are two ways that I can see to interpret Kratzer's claim that choice function variables remain free. The usual way of understanding free variables is that they are licit only if the common ground provides a value for them. In other words, free variables are presuppositional items; the speaker and the hearer must both be able to provide the same value for the variable, or else the utterance will not be felicitous.
On the other hand, this may not be what Kratzer intends. From her discussion, and based on the explicit comparison she provides with Fodor and Sag's 'specific indefinites', it seem that her view is that only the speaker needs to be able to provide a value for the choice function variable. The hearer may not be able to provide a value, but will realize that the speaker has one in mind."
Matthewson, op. cit., p. 125.

 "This leaves only the second possibility for the free variable theory, namely that non-polarity DPs are 'specific' in the sense of the speaker needing to have a particular

individual (or choice function) in mind when s/he utters the sentence. It is not easy to test such matters as what the speaker needs to have in mind. However, the context and mini-discourse in (95) seem to suggest that the DP *ta púkwa* 'a book' is not 'specific' in this sense.

(95)   Context: Rose goes to the store and asks the salesperson for a copy of the book
         False Crow. The salesperson gives her a book in a bag, and Rose pays for it.
         When she gets home, she tells her daughter:

      i.   tecwp-kán   [ta púkw-a]
              buy-1SG.SUBJ DET book-DET
              'I bought a book.'

         When uttering (i), Rose thinks that the book she bought was *False Crow*. But
         when she opens the bag, she finds out that the salesperson made a mistake and she
         really bought a book by Ray Kinsella, not *False Crow*.

         Was her statement in (i) wrong?
         Consultant's comment: "No. I did buy a book, I paid for it."

Consultant's comment in other similar examples indicate that a sentence containing a DP such as *ta púkwa* is true just in case any book satisfies the conditions given by the rest of the sentence. I have not been able to find a case where it affects truth conditions which particular book satisfies the relevant conditions."
Matthewson, op. cit., p. 123 f.

4.   A comment on Matthewson

As illustrated by the funeral example, there is a crucial difference between saying that the speaker has a particular choice function in mind, and saying that the speaker has a particular individual in mind. In the funeral example, the mourners in Mindelheim have a particular method for picking out a person among them in mind, yet they do not have a

particular person in mind for whom they are praying. Likewise, in Matthewson's example, Rose might have had a particular choice function in mind, yet might not necessarily have known what individual was picked out by that function. The choice function might have been given to Rose in the form 'λg. ιx (g(x) & in(this bag)(x))', for example.

If the choice function in Matthewson's example might be given to Rose in the form 'λg. ιx (g(x) & in(this bag)(x))', what's the difference between a specific indefinite and a definite DP, then? There is a big difference indeed. Definite articles come with the presupposition that their common noun set is a singleton. Indefinite articles do not trigger such a presupposition, even on a specific interpretation. The following examples illustrate this point quite dramatically:

(3)   a.   We are praying for the person among us who will die next.

       b.   # We are praying for the person among us.

       c.   We are praying for some (particular) person among us.

The choice function to be contextually supplied for **some** in 3(c) might very well be provided via a definite description — the phrase "the person who will die next", for example. Nevertheless, we <u>have</u> to use an indefinite article in 3(c). A definite article results in anomaly, as shown by 3(b). It's natural to presuppose that there will be exactly one person among us who will die next. But if plural morphology is taken seriously, it can't be that there is just one person among us.

5.   Downward entailing contexts

In a recent paper (Chierchia 2001) argues that Kratzer's referential analysis of wide-scope indefinites has problems with sentences like (4):

(4)   Not [every student]$_x$ read every paper that some$_x$ professor wrote.

I do not see the problem. The referential theory says that (4) can only get an 'intermediate scope' reading for the indefinite DP in contexts where "some" can successfully refer to a method pairing all relevant students with a unique professor. For out-of-the-blue utterances, a function pairing every student with their favorite professor in the field of the papers to be read (or something like that) can be easily accommodated. What happens if we ask subjects to judge (4) against the background of particular contexts? Let's try this one: Suppose we are told that all students but John read every single paper by Chomsky, but just one paper by Montague, and John read every single paper by Montague, but just one paper by Chomsky. Given this scenario, (4) seems intuitively false on the intended 'intermediate scope' reading. This judgment is quite compatible with the referential analysis. For reasons we may never fully understand, the context provided most readily evokes a function that connects John to Montague, and all other students to Chomsky, rather than, say, John to Chomsky. and all the other students to Montague.   While it doesn't seem to be easy to explain such preferences, it should not be too hard to establish their existence. Such existence claims are in principle testable. Be this as it may, in contrast to Matthewson's account of wide-scope indefinites, which existentially binds the choice function variable at the highest level, the referential analysis is not automatically threatened by the mere existence of verifying values for the choice function variable in (4). For (4) to be a threat for the contextualist account of wide-scope indefinites, a good case has to be made that problematic values are in fact plausible values in realistic contexts.

Interestingly, intermediate existential closure of the choice function variable doesn't yield an adequate analysis for the perceived 'intermediate scope' reading of (4). Just assign to every student a professor who didn't write any papers. Given that there are almost always professors with that property, it's very easy for (4) to be false on the reading with intermediate existential closure:

(4')   Not ([every student]$_x$ $\exists$f [x read every paper that f (professor) wrote]).

The existence of a single professor who didn't write any papers makes the unnegated counterpart of (4') trivially true, hence (4') comes out trivially false under those circumstances. Another problematic cases is (5):

(5)   a.   (Why were those students dismissed from the program?) They didn't read any books some teacher had recommended.

        b.   <u>Intermediate reading</u>
                They ∗ (λx. ∃f [x didn't read any books f (teacher) had recommended])

Here, too, intermediate existential closure doesn't give us what we need. For every student x, it's usually quite easy to find some teacher y such that x hasn't read any of the books y had recommended. But that's not what is meant on the perceived 'intermediate scope' reading. Recourse to Skolemization and contextual restrictions? We are pairing each student x with a particular teacher that is connected to x in some relevant way. That's just what the contextualist account of wide-scope indefinites does, in fact.

References

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