Abstract for Sinn und Bedeutung VII

Arbitrary readings of third person plural pronominals
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It is well-known that pronouns allow readings without an antecedent (Yule (1982)). Since Suner (1983) pronouns with these readings have been referred to as arbitrary pronouns (drawing a parallel with arbitrary PRO). This talk adduces evidence that at least 5 distinct arbitrary readings should be distinguished based on distributional criteria.

If it is true that the antecedentless readings cannot be considered a unitary phenomenon, then arbitrary is not a natural category and in particular, the theory should not postulate an arb-index as in Rizzi (1986). I develop a classification of distinct arbitrary readings based on distributional criteria and finally I will give an analysis for these readings.


(1) (I) specific existential reading (temporally anchored):
   Tocan a la puerta. (Spanish)
   (they) knock.3pl at the door (=someone is knocking...)

(II) vague existential reading (not temporally anchored):
   Han encontrado una motocicleta en el patio. (Spanish)
   (they) found a motorbike in the courtyard.

(III) inferred existential reading (inferred from indirect evidence):
   Aquí han comido mariscos. (Spanish)
   here, (they) have.3pl eaten seafood (=someone)

(IV) corporate reading (predicates with a designated subject):
   Volvieron a aumentar el IVA. (Spanish)
   (they) raised taxes again.
   Planean convocar elecciones.
   (they) plan.3pl to call elections.

(V) universal reading (licensed by a locative):
   En España hablan español. (Spanish)
   In Spain, (they) speak.3pl Spanish.

The main arguments to distinguish between the different types come from cross-linguistic comparison drawing on English, French, Russian, Spanish and Moroccan Arabic. The contrast between French and Spanish, e.g., shows that the specific existential reading is independent of the vague existential and of the collective reading. As pointed out by Kleiber (1994), the French 3pl pronoun ils cannot have a specific existential interpretation corresponding roughly to someone while the collective reading is possible; further notice that the vague existential reading is possible in French (cf (2d)):

(2) a. Ils sonnent. (French)
   ok They(ref) ring (at the door). But *Someone is ringing at the door.

   b. Ils nous attaquent.
   ok They(ref) are attacking us. But *Someone is attacking us.

   c. Ils ont encore augmenté les impots.
   They raised taxes again. (corporate reading) (exs in Kleiber (1994))

   d. Ils ont trouvé une moto dans la cour.
They found a motorbike in the courtyard. (vague existential)

The corresponding Spanish examples in (1) all admit and antecedentless (arb) reading.

The analysis I propose that there are two possible interpretative options for 3pl antecedentless pronouns: they can be translated into the semantic representation either as referring to a plural group or as a variable. The translation as a plural group gives rise to the corporate and to the universal reading if the conditions for the identification of the group are met, while the translation as a variable ultimately results in one of the existential readings.

It is generally accepted that the central property of 3pl forms is to exclude the speaker and the hearer. Following Kleiber (1994), I propose that this is the reason that the 3pl arb pronouns cannot get the reading of "people in general". If "everyone but you and me" is not a group that can be referred to by default the interpretation of non-existental arbitrary readings needs to restrict the reference of the 3pl to a group. This group can be defined by the predicate (corporate reading) or by the locative expression that functions like an I-level predicate for the universal reading.

As the dissociation between specific existential reading and vague existential reading in French shows, the two readings must rely on a separate mechanisms. I propose that the vague existential reading is due to existential quantification over the event as a whole: the arbitrary subject is only indirectly existentially quantified as a participant to the whole event. Spanish disposes of a second possibility yielding the specific existential reading where th existential quantification targets the variable introduced by the subject in combination with a spatio-temporally anchored event. I propose that the difference between French and Spanish is due to the fact that subject pronouns in French are not in the scope of the default existential closure (Heim (1982)) that applies to the VP while Spanish null pronouns stay in the scope of existential closure.

References