

Reading Response: Partee (1989) 'Binding Implicit Variables in Quantified Contexts'

Background

One important set of background distinctions for this paper concerns the different possible uses for English third-person pronouns (e.g., *he, she, it, they*). The **deictic use** is illustrated in (1): here, *she* refers to some salient individual in the shared physical surroundings of the speaker and the hearer, i.e., the non-linguistic context of utterance.

- (1) (A woman walks into a bar) Who's she?

The **anaphoric use** is illustrated in (2): here, *he* refers to some salient individual that was previously introduced into the discourse, i.e., the surrounding linguistic context. The preceding phrase that was directly responsible for introducing this individual into the discourse constitutes the "antecedent" for the pronoun.

- (2) The professor was late again today! He is really starting to annoy me.

Because a pronoun's referent under both a deictic and an anaphoric use directly comes from the surrounding context (linguistic or non-linguistic), pronouns are canonical examples of **context-dependent elements**.

A somewhat different use for third-person pronouns is provided in (3) and (4):

- (3) Every mother thinks that her children are wonderful.
'For every individual x , if x is a mother, then x thinks that x 's children are wonderful.'
- (4) No professor likes the sound of his own voice.
'For every individual x , if x is a professor, then x does not like the sound of x 's voice.'

These examples illustrate the **bound-variable use**: the pronouns do not refer to any particular individual, but rather range over the individuals that are introduced by some quantificational expression elsewhere in the sentence. One might say that here, the pronouns refer to individuals that are somehow introduced in a sentence-internal, "quantificational" context (more on this as the semester proceeds). For now, the important observation is that third-person pronouns display all three of the above uses.

Another important background distinction concerns the difference between **closed-class** and **open-class** lexical items. Roughly, this distinction concerns the part-of-speech, or grammatical category, that a word belongs to. Closed-class lexical items include prepositions, determiners, conjunctions, modal/auxiliary verbs, and (importantly) pronouns. These grammatical categories contain relatively few items—in fact, their members can often be

exhaustively listed. Furthermore, it is relatively rare for a new item to be added to these grammatical categories—this is the sense in which they constitute “closed” word classes. Open-class lexical items include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These grammatical categories are large, and continually gain new members via morphological derivation, coinage, and borrowing. A related difference between the two concerns their semantic content: whereas open-class lexical items carry substantial descriptive content, the meanings of closed-class items are “functional” in nature, with little, if any, descriptive content.

One final bit of advice: don’t spend too much time puzzling over some of the technical vocabulary that Partee uses, with which you are likely unfamiliar. In particular, I have in mind her discussion of “paycheck” sentences and “pronouns of laziness” (pg. 345), “donkey pronouns” (pgs. 346-347, 348), and “c-command” (pg. 349). In all of these places, focus instead on her descriptions of the illustrative data, which are generally quite precise and clearly written.

Assignment

Provide a concise overview (one single-spaced page of targeted prose should be sufficient) of the Partee reading. Be sure to address the following questions in your response:

- (A) What is the central descriptive claim that Partee argues for in this paper? Choose some of the data that she provides in section 2, and show precisely how they support her claim. (You do not have to provide an exhaustive discussion for all of the data presented in that section.)
- (B) What are some of the questions/concerns for a theory of context-dependent elements that these descriptive observations give rise to?
- (C) What is the import of the parallel sets of data provided in (18) and (19)?
- (D) In section 4, Partee outlines one possible approach to the data that she discusses in this paper, which she dubs the “do it all with pronouns”, or the “uniform pronoun” approach. She also identifies two sorts of problems for such an approach. Briefly summarize the major claims of the “uniform pronoun” approach, as well as Partee’s two objections to it.

You should also feel free to discuss other points that strike you as interesting or important, to raise objections to Partee’s claims, or to pose any questions that arose while reading the article.