

On the ambiguity of descriptions: A defence of the world-pronoun theory

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A threat to the ambiguity view? For many tasks in intensional semantics, it has become standard to assume that DPs in opaque contexts are ambiguous at least between a “transparent” and an “opaque” reading (and maybe more, given the possibility of multiple embedding). One way to derive this ambiguity is via LF movement; another is to stipulate phonologically null pronouns denoting possible worlds in the structure of DPs [2].

Koralus [5] has recently cast doubt on such a view. Relying on an ambiguity test [13] according to which ellipsis requires identity of interpretation, he has pointed out the possibility of the discourse

- (1) Mike actually wanted to meet the winner and Cathy nearly might have.

in the situation where Mike wanted to meet whoever won (the traditional *de dicto* reading) whereas Cathy wanted to meet the particular person who had not won but was very likely to (even though Cathy was perhaps unaware of that—the *de re* reading of *the winner* w.r.t. *want*, although not w.r.t. *might*). As the possibility of ellipsis in (1) shows, Koralus argues, there is no *de dicto* / *de re* ambiguity for definite descriptions.

Whereas there might be potential ways out of the predicament, e.g. if one endorses the mediæval theory of *ampliation* [6], according to which a term in an opaque context denotes counterfactual *as well as* actual things (so that the identity-of-interpretation condition is observed in (1)),—the alternative solutions are most likely not without their own problems. The present contribution examines the force of Koralus’s criticisms and aims to show that they are not as disastrous for the ambiguity view as Koralus claims.

Koralus’ cases are nothing special. If Koralus’ identity assumption were correct, the case of (2) would be nearly as problematic for a theory of ellipsis as his (1).

- (2) John thinks Rafael is the winner, but Mary doubts that he is \emptyset .

The reason is, of course, that on the world-pronoun theory any predicate has to be supplied with a world argument, so that the ellipsis of *the winner* in the second conjunct of (2) violates the identity-of-interpretation condition, as the world argument of *is the winner* in manipulated by *John thinks* in the licenser and by *Mary doubts* in the ellipsis site.

Strictly speaking, in the case of (2) Koralus’ viewpoint can be defended. In formal semantics it is often assumed [8, 9, 11], the defender may point out, that the main predicate of a clause does not take a world argument itself but rather is evaluated at the index borne by the whole clause (the reason for this solution being a constraint on transparent readings known as Generalisation X [8]):

- (3) ... $\lambda w [w [\text{Rafael is the winner}]]$

Therefore, a more careful argument should rather appeal to cases where (a part of) an argument, not the main predicate, is elided or replaced with a pro-form.

Koralus’ cases are sloppy readings. The world-pronoun theory would assign to (1) the LF roughly as in

- (1') Mike wanted $\lambda w [w [[\text{the winner}_w] \lambda x [\text{PRO meets } x]]]$
and might $\lambda v [\text{Cathy wants } \lambda w [w [[\text{the winner}_v] \lambda x [\text{PRO meets } x]]]]$

Given this, the elided part of (1) differs from the licenser of ellipsis no more than in the value of one world index, viz. that on the predicate *winner* (or, depending on the theory, the determiner *the* that takes *winner* as its restrictor argument).

There are known cases of pronominalisation where the full denotational identity of the antecedent and the pronoun is not observed; take, for instance, Karttunen’s [3] “paycheck sentence” (4) or

Partee's [7] example (5). Moreover, even ellipsis allows for "strict" and "sloppy" readings, as illustrated (6) by Keshet's [4] example.

(4) The man who gave his check to his wife was wiser than the man who gave it to his mistress.

(5) My home was once in Maryland, but now it's in Los Angeles.

(6) Sherlock saw his hat. Watson did, too. 'Watson saw Watson's/Sherlock's hat'

Thus we suggest that Koralus's alleged counterexamples are evidence for the availability of sloppy readings w.r.t. world pronouns and not for the falsity of the *de dicto / de re* ambiguity.

Specificity. There remains an issue which, for Koralus, constitutes additional evidence for the absence of ambiguity. Namely, pronominalisation (in the sense of *do so*-replacement) seems to ignore differences in specificity, as in

(7) John wants a lighter and so does Mary. John ends up stealing it and Mary buys one at the cigar emporium.

While some technical work should be done in order to cope with this problem, it has to be borne in mind that scope distinctions are not the only option to derive specificity contrasts, the alternative being to use Hintikka's Independence-Friendly Logic [1, 10, 12].

All in all, Koralus might have succeeded in his critique of the movement approach to the *de dicto / de re* ambiguity but not as much in his refutation of the ambiguity itself.

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