

Deriving *De Re*: In Favour of Moderate Uniformity

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Abstract. In the study of the ambiguities found in propositional attitude reports, the discovery of new interpretations led to the proliferation of semantic mechanisms stipulated to derive them. On the other hand, some authors have made attempts to reduce the number of those mechanisms. The present paper aims at a critical evaluation of some reductionist proposals, defending moderate unification that recognises two distinct mechanisms behind *de re* which both lead to genuine ambiguities. DOI: 10.52119/LPHS.2024.40.38.009.

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Introduction. Historically, the studies of possible interpretations of propositional attitude reports followed the route of proliferating the range of readings they stipulated, or discovered. The description of a two-way ambiguity in [14] was followed by the discovery of two more readings in [7], of which the “specific opaque” reading was subject to a later debate [18, 1], and the “non-specific transparent” split into two apparently distinct mechanisms—evaluating a predicate as if it belonged to the matrix clause [12, 6] and assorted substitution- or revision-based techniques [15, 17, 3, 2]—whose areas of application, even if they overlap [9], are distinct. [8] adds a generic interpretation for some definite descriptions in attitude contexts. Furthermore, it turns out that some languages employ more than one syntactic strategy for the same type of interpretation [5].

This proliferation led to a contrariwise movement in recent years, which consists of poorly coordinated attempts to reduce this variety to one or maybe two mechanisms whose combined power would suffice to derive all and only the available interpretations. The present paper aims at a critical evaluation of those unificationist proposals, defending moderate unification that recognises two distinct mechanisms behind *de re* / “transparency” which both lead to genuine ambiguities.

Against Minimal Machinery. A handful of authors have tried to reduce the number of semantic mechanisms employed to predict the readings and/or to keep their complexity low. For one, Benbaji-Elhadad [2] asks why (1) can be felicitously uttered when John only knows that Flight AF62 has arrived and we know that Mary was on the flight.

(1) John thinks that Mary has arrived.

The analysis stipulates a substitution operator in the syntax that checks, among other things, whether ‘Mary has arrived’ and ‘Flight AF62 has arrived’ are equivalent against the background of our shared knowledge. Under Benbaji’s analysis, such a “revisionist” interpretation of (1) is therefore a genuinely separate reading but the syntactic machinery that delivers that reading is kept relatively simple (perhaps even avoiding existential closure over the variable ranging over contextually salient propositions equivalent to ‘Mary has arrived’).

However, there are reasons against the uniformity of the substitution mechanism. First, as discussed by Mayr and Schmitt [11] and in fact already by Benbaji, “revisionist” interpretations are only available if the reported proposition answers the same question under discussion (QUD) as the actual belief of the attitude holder. E.g. (1) is fine although it ascribes to John a belief about Mary that he cannot hold (fine perhaps even when John has the opposite belief!), but (2) is infelicitous because in addition to that it deviates from the QUD—i.e. whether the arrival took place. Thus track should be

kept of which part of the proposition can be read in a “revisionist” way and which cannot; following the studies of topic and focus [4], Mayr and Schmitt do this by means of Alternative Semantics.

(2) John thinks that Mary was on board of Flight AF62.

A similar point is made in [19] regarding the behaviour of reflexives with respect to *de re* interpretations [16]: without special marking of the locus of “transparent” interpretation within the subordinate clause, the requirement of contextual equivalence overgenerates interpretations, e.g. even if we know that X winning will annoy Y, who secretly envies X, we still cannot claim (3) when X, who knows nothing about Y, simply wants to win. The reason seems to be that, although the propositions are equivalent on the set of worlds conforming to what we know, the properties of winning and of annoying Y are not equivalent in general, even on that restricted set of worlds, but only equivalent “for” X.

(3) X wants to annoy Y.

In Defence of Ambiguity. The analysis by Mayr and Schmitt [11] is predicated on the revolutionary idea that the *de re*, or “transparent” and the *de dicto*, or “opaque” interpretations of noun phrases do not correspond to distinct syntactic construals, i.e. are not separate readings of an ambiguous string. The authors adduce empirical evidence to that effect, i.e. scenarios where one attitude holder has a *de dicto* belief of a given form and the rest only have *de re* beliefs; and vice versa. In those scenarios, it is claimed, the *only*-test introduced by Percus and Sauerland [13] precisely to demonstrate the existence of two separate readings, fails. E.g. if Bob thinks, “Eve is involved with Ann,” whereas others only think “The girl over there is involved with Ann” where the girl over there is known *to us* to be Eve (or vice versa), (4) is claimed to be false.

(4) Only Bob thinks that Eve is involved with Ann.

Whether or not these judgements come to be widely accepted (there is tension between them and the judgements on which Percus and Sauerland’s analysis is based), two theoretical remarks are in order. First, cases where only one holder has a *de re* belief and the rest have *de dicto* beliefs are less instructive than Mayr and Schmitt take them to be. This is because concept generators, Percus and Sauerland-style device for generating *de re* interpretations, take an individual *a* and a world *w* as arguments and yield the individual with which the attitude holder’s alter ego in *w* is acquainted in just the way the actual holder is acquainted with *a* in the actual world. There are a plethora of possible acquaintance relations, and it is not preposterous to assume that the relation of identity is among them; as Maier puts it in relation to *de se*, “equality is the ‘universal acquaintance’: everyone is always self-identical” [10]. (This is an *ontological* explanation, as it relies on the existence of an entity, i.e. the identity relation, within the range of values of a (concept generator) variable rather than exclusively on the structure of the sentence.) Given this, *de dicto* can be viewed as a special case of *de re*—but not vice versa.

Second, Mayr and Schmitt suggest that *de re* interpretations may be instances of imprecision and provide some evidence for this being so; but if this suggestion is on the right track, in my view their empirical result, at least concerning scenarios where only one holder has a *de dicto* belief, is unexpected. The reason is that in such cases one should be able to adopt a higher standard of precision under which the holder in (4) will count as the only individual who “genuinely” believes that Eve is involved with Ann, whereas the rest only believe something loosely similar; so (4) should have a true understanding in such a scenario, contrary to what is reported.

Conclusion. In the light of recent efforts to bring the apparent variety of readings of attitude reports to unity, a view emerges on which no more than two mechanisms are needed to generate them all: one is a scoping or indexing mechanism used when a predicate receives a displaced interpretation, like in (5) on the reading where *semanticist* picks up the set of actual, rather than counterfactual, semanticists; another is some “revisionist” technique that can see structure.

(5) If every *semanticist* owned a villa in Tuscany, there would be no field at all. [12]

However, the attempts to narrow this variety even further, in particular by means of uniformly proposition-level substitution/revision or by explaining *de dicto* / *de re* ambiguity away as not empirically real, do not appear to be conclusively successful as things stand now.

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