

A Puzzle About Reciprocals and Ontology

Gennaro Chierchia (Boston)

Consider the following sentence:

- (1) Combat dogs and roosters often fight each other

Among the various readings that this sentence has, one can identify (at least) the following:

- (2) a. Combat dogs often fight roosters and viceversa
b. Combat dogs often fight each other and roosters often fight each other

As is well known, reflexives can have reciprocal interpretations. And, unsurprisingly, the pattern in (1)-(2) can be replicated with reflexives.

- (3) Combat dogs and roosters often fight themselves

Sentence (3) can have both readings in (2). Contrast all this with (4):

- (4) The combat dog and the rooster often fight each other

Sentence (4) only has a reading corresponding to (2a); it cannot have a reading corresponding to (2b). However, both bare plurals (like *combat dogs*) and definite singulars on their generic use (e.g., *the combat dog*) can (or, according to some, must) denote kinds. Thus either the subject in (1) has the same denotation as the subject in (4); or they at least share a reading in which they both refer to kinds. This is witnessed by the equivalence of the following sentences:

- (5) a. Combat dogs and roosters will become extinct (if fights are not stopped)
b. The combat dog and the rooster will become extinct (if fights are not stopped)

The puzzle, then, becomes evident: why is it the case that with reciprocals bare plurals and definite generic singulars are clearly *not* equivalent? Why does sentence (4) lack the reading corresponding to (2b)?

One way to address this puzzle, might be along the lines of Dayal (2004). She argues, on the basis of an interesting array of facts, that there are two sorts of kinds, namely “singular” and “plural” ones. Such entities have different properties. Singular kinds must be uniquely instantiated and can be characterized as having a more “opaque” relation to their instances than plural kinds (e.g. no access to “Derived Kind Predication”, or similar type shifting devices). If singular kinds are different from plural ones, the subjects in (1) vs. (4) have different denotations after all. This might give us a handle on why the truth conditions of (1) vs. (4) differ.

However, whether singular vs. plural kinds are ontologically distinguished or not, it is unlikely that this difference in denotation is the source of the contrast in (1) vs. (4). For consider the following sentence:

- (6) The combat dog and the rooster often fight themselves

On the reciprocal interpretation of (6), this sentence seems to allow *both* readings in (2) (at least in some dialects). In particular, it can be used to say that combat dogs fight with each other and so do roosters. Thus (6) has two readings while (4) has only one.

The pattern under discussion is very general. It can be duplicated with mass vs. count nouns (Gillon 1992, Chierchia 1998):

- (7) a. The tables and the furniture are on top of each other/themselves (two readings)
- b. The furniture from Macys and the furniture from Sears are on top of each other (one reading)

It can be duplicated with plural vs. groups (Magri 2003).

- (8) a. The boys and the girls like each other/themselves (two readings)
- b. That group of boys and this group of girl like each other (one reading)

So we are stuck with the puzzle: What is it about the grammar of reciprocals that blocks the relevant reading? Does this tell us anything about kinds of objects in our quantificational domain?

References:

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