

Possessives in context

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It has been argued already many times in the literature that Williams’s (1982) contention that “the relation between the possessive NP and the following N' can be any relation at all” is not correct. Research by Barker (1995), Partee (1997), Partee and Borschev (2000a; 2000b; to appear), and Vikner and Jensen (1999), among others, has shown that there are *grammatical* constraints on what possessives can mean. Not all (potentially conceivable) interpretations are available for every specific instance of a possessive NP, which suggests the hypothesis that these interpretations—or better, classes of them—have distinct sources in the semantic composition of possessives.

In previous work (Storto, 2000a,b) I have argued that grammatical constraints on the interpretation of possessives are to be found not only in the lexical choice of possessor and possessum, but in the syntactic/semantic properties of the *whole* possessive NP as well. Even keeping the context of use and the lexical choice of possessor and possessum constant, indefinite possessive NPs license only a subset of the interpretations licensed by possessive NPs. In particular, the relation holding between possessor and possessum in indefinite NPs seems to be restricted to the relation of ownership: indefinite possessives do not license interpretations whose semantics seems to be provided by their context of use. I used this as evidence to claim that *ownership interpretations* and *contextual interpretations* have distinct sources (i.e. are encoded in distinct ways) in the semantic composition of possessive NPs.

In this talk I revise, expand and strengthen the arguments for these conclusions on the basis of the following observation: even those interpretations for possessives that—at first sight—derive from their context of use do not constitute a homogeneous class. Two types of interpretations are easily distinguished on the basis of their distribution. E.g., consider the fact that the Italian (1c) can be used in the context given in (1a) but is quite infelicitous in the context given in (1b). The indefinite NP *due cani di Gianni* can be interpreted as denoting two entities satisfying the property in (2a) but cannot be interpreted as denoting two entities satisfying the property in (2b). Interpretations of the first type can be characterized as involving relations that can be described as *control*: the possessor has some sort of control on the possessum or on his bearing the relevant relation to the possessum. Conversely, interpretations of the second type involve relations that cannot be construed as instances of control. The distribution of interpretations of the first type—*control interpretations*—is essentially unrestricted. Interpretations that cannot be construed as involving a relation of control—*contextual interpretations*—have a more restricted distribution (see the table in (3)). This suggests (i) that the relation of ownership is just a special case of control, and (ii) that the context of use plays a different role in the derivation of control vs. contextual interpretations.

I argue that the different role played by context in the derivation of the two types of interpretations is a consequence of the different syntactic/semantic encoding of the relation holding between possessor and possessum in the two cases. In control interpretations the relation is encoded in the semantic composition of the possessive NP by a lexical constant $\mathcal{C}_{\text{ctrl}}$ denoting a general *control* relation, whose interpretation is further specified as a *pragmatic inferences* from the context of use. In contextual interpretations the relation is encoded by a variable \mathcal{R} whose meaning is *not specified at all* in the semantic composition of the possessive NP and is entirely determined by the context of use. I furthermore propose that the semantics of the definite article is crucial in the assignment of a value to this relational variable. \mathcal{R} is *not* a pronoun-like category and assignment of a value to it is not akin to (discourse-)binding. \mathcal{R} cannot be directly bound to an antecedent in the context or by a process of text-level existential closure as in the case of individual (type e) variables but

is assigned a value only as a consequence of the process of satisfaction of the *descriptive content presupposition* (Heim, 1982) triggered by definite articles on the properties they combine with.

This analysis—whose consequences for the taxonomy of possessive interpretations and for the more general issue of information-tracking in discourse will be discussed in the talk—accounts for the restricted distribution of contextual interpretations: the variable \mathcal{R} cannot get bound in indefinite and quantificational possessive and the derivation of contextual interpretations crashes (an LF containing an unbound variable is not well-formed).

Examples

- (1) a. *Ieri a Gianni e Paolo sono stati affidati due gruppi (distinti) di cani...*
 yesterday to Gianni and Paolo were entrusted two groups (different) of dogs
- b. *Ieri Gianni e Paolo sono stati attaccati da due gruppi (distinti) di cani...*
 yesterday Gianni and Paolo were attacked by two groups (different) of dogs...
- c. *sfortunatamente due cani di Gianni avevano la rabbia.*
 unfortunately two dogs of Gianni had the rabies
- (2) a. $\lambda x[\mathbf{dog}'(x) \wedge \mathbf{be.entrusted.to}'(x, \mathbf{g})]$
- b. $\lambda x[\mathbf{dog}'(x) \wedge \mathbf{attack}'(x, \mathbf{g})]$

w.r.t.	definite	indefinite/quantificational	partitive indefinite/quantificational
(3) (1a)	\checkmark <i>i cani di Gianni</i> the dogs of Gianni	\checkmark <i>due cani/ogni cane di Gianni</i> two dogs/each dog of Gianni	\checkmark <i>due/ognuno dei cani di Gianni</i> two/each of the dogs of Gianni
(1b)	\checkmark <i>i cani di Gianni</i> the dogs of Gianni	$\#$ <i>due cani/ogni cane di Gianni</i> two dogs/each dog of Gianni	\checkmark <i>due/ognuno dei cani di Gianni</i> two/each of the dogs of Gianni

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