Pronouns, presuppositions, and semantic variation
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This paper addresses the question of whether and how the semantics of third-person pronouns can vary across languages. I investigate third-person non-demonstrative pronouns in St’át’imcets (Lillooet Salish), including null pro and its overt animate plural counterpart wit. I provide evidence for a striking cross-linguistic difference between the St’át’imcets pronouns and English ones: third-person non-demonstrative pronouns in St’át’imcets lack familiarity effects (cf. also Davis 2006). These pronouns may introduce new discourse referents, they allow apparent ‘backwards pronominalization’ in situations in which English disallows it, and they behave in other respects like indefinites (e.g., they participate in sluicing). A novel pronoun is illustrated in (1) (from Davis 2006); the phenomenon is widespread and not limited to a literary register:

(1) na=s-pála7-s=a [tayt=wit].
   DET.ABS=NOM-one-3POSS=DET [hungry=3PL]

   nilh [s=wa7=s] cwíl’-em ku=s7ílhen ta=nk’yáp=a múta7 ta=sxgwálcw=a
   then [NOM=IMPF=3POSS seek-MID DET=food DET=coyote=DET and DET=fox=DET]

‘Once upon a time, they were hungry. So [a coyote and a fox], went looking for food.’

I next observe that St’át’imcets pronouns parallel St’át’imcets full DPs with respect to the properties just listed: all full DPs in St’át’imcets are indefinite (Matthewson 1998, 1999). This suggests a generalized version of Elbourne’s (2005) proposal that English pronouns have the semantics of definite determiners. If we are prepared to generalize boldly on the basis of a two-language sample, we can predict that pronouns in any language L will share the core semantics of determiners in L, whatever that semantics may be.

Interestingly, however, the parallel between pronouns and determiners in St’át’imcets is not complete. A major part of Elbourne’s motivation for the pronoun/determiner parallel is the equivalence of (2) and (3) in English. If [[it]] = [[the]] and NP-deletion takes place in (2), (2) and (3) have identical LFs.

(2) Every man who owns a donkey beats it.
(3) Every man who owns a donkey beats the donkey.

However, the St’át’imcets versions of (2-3), given in (4-5), are not equivalent. (4) is interpreted like (2), but (5) is rejected on its ‘donkey sentence’ interpretation, and can only mean that there is one poor dog who is beaten by every man.

(4) tákem i=sqáyqeycw=a wa7 az’ ku=sqáxa7 wa7 seksek-n-ítas pro
   all DET.PL=men=DET IMPF buy DET=dog IMPF beat-DIR-3PL.ERG pro
   ‘Every man who buys a dog beats it.’

(5) # tákem i=sqáyqeycw=a wa7 az’ ku=sqáxa7 wa7 seksek-n-ítas ti=sqáx7=a
   all DET.PL=men=DET IMPF buy DET=dog IMPF beat-DIR-3PL.ERG DET=dog=DET
   ‘Every man who buys a dog beats the dog.’
Our challenge is to find a semantics for St’át’imcets pronouns which shares with determiners the absence of a familiarity effect, while blocking donkey interpretations only for full DPs. My solution relies on a controversial but independently-supported proposal, namely that presuppositions in St’át’imcets do not place the same constraints on the common ground as English presuppositions do (Matthewson 2006). What this means, roughly speaking, is that presuppositions exist in St’át’imcets and are detectable, but place constraints only on the speaker’s knowledge, not on the hearer’s (cf. Gauker 1998). If we assume this, we can adopt Elbourne’s denotation for English *it/the*, given in (6), directly for St’át’imcets pronouns.

(6) 

\[
[[it/the/pro]]^g = \lambda f \langle<s,e>,<s,t>\> \cdot \lambda s : \exists ! x . f(\lambda s'.x)(s) = 1 . \lambda x . f((\lambda s'.x)(s) = 1
\]

This denotation, combined with the above assumption about what it means to ‘presuppose’ something in St’át’imcets, correctly accounts for the donkey interpretations, as well as for the fact that St’át’imcets pronouns, while possessing a uniqueness ‘presupposition’, can be used in novel contexts. The cross-linguistic variation in familiarity effects for pronouns/determiners is thus derived from a broader lack of familiarity effects in the entire St’át’imcets language.

As for the distinction between (4) and (5), I analyze this as deriving from the deictic presuppositions of the overt determiners, which are absent from the pronouns. We need only minimally alter (6) for overt determiners, so that these do not allow binding of their situation argument, but instead are forced to pick out a unique individual in the salient discourse situation.

This approach has a further interesting consequence, namely that it solves a problem for my previous analysis of St’át’imcets determiners (Matthewson 1999). As pointed out by Davis (2004), St’át’imcets allows sloppy readings in VP-ellipsis, which poses a problem for a widest-scope choice-function analysis. The situation semantics analysis correctly predicts that narrow scope/binding is licit only in cases of ellipsis. When a determiner is elided, its deictic features are lost – a claim for which I provide independent evidence – and the denotation of the determiner reduces to that of (6), which correctly predicts sloppy identity.

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Davis, Henry 2004. VP ellipsis in St’át’imcets and some of its implications. *Papers for the 39th International Conference on Salish and Neighbouring Languages*, UBCWPL.


