Loose nominals

Sreekar Raghotham
Rutgers University
`sreekar.raghotham@rutgers.edu`

Abstract

Proxy readings of nominals are a type of loose talk. They show the same empirical signature as other instances of loose talk. I model this behaviour by treating proxy readings as resulting from underspecification of individuals. This view helps better understand the behaviour of intensive reflexives and indexiphors.

1 Loose talk about nominals

Nominals can often be used to talk about entities that are representations of their referents — call such uses 'proxy readings'. Proxy readings don't seem to be available when the nominal is modified by an intensive reflexive: (1b) can only mean Ringo the drummer is on the second floor, while (1a) can be felicitously used to indicate the location of a statue of Ringo.

(1)   a. Ringo is on the second floor
      b. Ringo himself is on the second floor

This behaviour is reminiscent of loose talk (Sperber and Wilson 1985; Lasersohn 1999). There too, speakers felicitously deviate from the truth, with some modifiers ('regulators') curtailing allowable deviance: conversational goals allowing, (2a) is felicitous if John arrived at 9:05PM, but (2b) isn't.

(2)   a. John arrived at 9PM
      b. John arrived at 9PM exactly

Carter (2021) observes an asymmetry when there are two possibly loose expressions of the same kind (cf. Lewis 1979; Klecha 2018). The regulated instance of a loose utterance has to follow the unmodified instance, but not vice versa (3). Nominals behave similarly: proxy readings of nominals are allowed when they precede a regulated use of a nominal that refers to the same individual, but not vice versa (4).

(3)   a.   John left at 9 but he didn't leave at 9 exactly
      b. #John left at 9 exactly but he didn't leave at 9.
      c.   John left at 9:03 exactly . . . # However, John left at 9PM.

(4)   a. Ringo is in the museum but Ringo himself isn't
      b. #Ringo himself is in the museum, but Ringo isn't
      c. Akhil said that he himself was in the green room. . . . # We found out that he$_\mathbf{P}$ was next to Chaplin

The presence of a regulating expression is crucial. A proxy reading of the anaphor is available even though it follows a standard interpretation of its antecedent (5). Indeed, (5a) is the standard example for proxy readings of anaphors (Jackendoff 1992, *a.o*). Moreover, the asymmetry is not limited to different instances of the same linguistic item: they survive so long as two nominals refer to the same individual (6).

(5) a. Ringo saw himself_P in the wax museum
     b. Each Beatle saw himself_P in the museum

(6) a. Ringo_P is in the museum but he himself isn't.
     b. #Ringo himself is in the museum, but he_P isn't.

It must be noted that regulators don't always curtail proxy readings, just as they don't always curtail loose readings of times (Lasersohn 1999, fn. 8). (7a) is felicitous even if the linguistics seminars don't start as the clock strikes 10. Similarly, in a context where there are only statues of Elvis and famous Elvis impersonators, (7b) is felicitous.[1]

(7) a. While philosophy seminars start 10 mins late, linguistics seminars start at exactly 10 o'clock.
     b. The impersonators are made of wax but Elvis himself is made of clay

These parallels lead me to conclude that proxy readings are a type of loose talk. The following sections outline a formal treatment of loose talk that preserves this parallel, and some empirical advantages of the view.

2   Analysis

Informally, loose talk is felicitous so long as the conversational goals allow it: If the differences between arriving at 9PM and 9:02PM are irrelevant, then (2a) is felicitous even if John arrived at 9:02 PM. Similarly, if differences between Ringo and his statue are irrelevant, then (1a) is a felicitous report of the location of Ringo's statue. Regulators make hitherto irrelevant distinctions relevant. For the case at hand, I suggest that the difference between an individual and its representation is made relevant by the intensifier.[2]

   To model this informal view of loose talk, I will assume that discourse referents denote underspecified individuals (Shan 2015). When we utter sentences like (1a), being on the second floor is predicated of an underspecified Ringo Starr, whose possible precisifications include the drummer, his book, his portrait, a bobble-head in his likeness and so on. While world knowledge may whittle away some possibilities, discourse referents' denotations may remain underspecified felicitously. On this view, the contribution of an intensifier like *himself* in (1b) is to 'split' individuals. Intuitively, the denotation of the individual modified by the intensifier is sharpened, but may still remain underspecified. The individuals discarded are now values of other variables.

x
r

$\dashrightarrow$

x	y	z
r$'$	r_port	r_bob
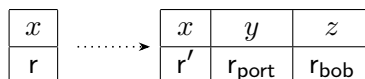
Formally, I adopt the framework in Shan 2015 and follow Carter in modeling the changes in relevance brought about by regulating expressions as modifications of accessibility relations (R). Accessibility relates two information states ($R \subseteq S \times S$, where S is a set of states). If state t is accessible from state s via the relation R, we write sRt. Truth at a state (s) for an assignment (g; at state s) is notated as $s, g_s \Vdash \phi$ (abstracting away from models). To model discourse

---

[1]Thanks to an AC reviewer for pointing this out. Another reviewer wonders whether the contrastive reduplication of Ghomeshi et al. (2004) is also a regulating expression, like the intensifier. At least to my ear, (7b) is infelicitous with 'RINGO ringo' in place of 'Ringo himself', which leads me to think that they are different phenomena with significant overlap in effects.

[2]Note that the distinctions can be made relevant by other means too. For instance, by means of an explicit reference to representations by means of 'a statue of x' or 'a picture of x'.

dynamics, we need a notion of a context. Contexts (σ), here, are pairs of a set of information states (S_σ), and an accessibility relation (R). Updating the context with a sentence with no regulating expressions, like (1a) whittles down the information states to those in which the sentence is true, leaving the rest of the context unchanged (8).

(8) $\sigma[\psi] \coloneqq \langle \{t \mid s\,R\,t \,\wedge\, t, g_t \Vdash \psi\}, R\rangle$

Update with a sentence containing an intensifier ($\beta(\textsc{int}(\alpha))$) has an effect not just on the set of worlds, but also on the accessibility relation. The only states now accessible are the ones in which the discourse referent has split (modeling the intuition that regulation leads to sharpening), and the states that remain in the context are the R_α accessible ones at which $\beta(\alpha)$ is true (9a). In saying that splitting discourse referents discards individuals, I assume that variable names can be added, but not deleted or modified.[3] An accessible state in which an earlier discourse referent has split is captured by a requirement of multiple counterparts (9b; I and C are the familiar predicates from Lewis)

(9)   a. $\sigma[\beta(\textsc{int}(\alpha))] \coloneqq \langle \{t \mid s\,R_\alpha\,t \,\wedge\, t, g_t \Vdash \beta(\alpha)\}, R_\alpha\rangle$
       b. $R_\alpha \coloneqq \{s, t \mid I\,\alpha\,s \,\wedge\, I\,\alpha\,t \,\wedge\, \exists x\,[x \neq \alpha \,\wedge\, I\,x\,t \,\wedge\, C\,x\,\alpha]\}$

On this account, an update with an intensifier modifying 'Ringo' can in principle discard the drummer to be the value of a new variable, keeping only representations of Ringo in the earlier slot. An unfortunate consequence of this is that (1b) might be made true if Ringo's statue is on the second floor, contrary to intuition. To prevent this, I assume that there is a privileged precisification of an individual (an essence if you will) which can never be discarded.

The present treatment of loose talk about nominals is most compatible in spirit with an interval-based treatment of loose talk about times (Siu 2023). This is because unlike for Lasersohn (1999) and Carter (2021), a loose use of 'Ringo' does not make (1a) literally false on this account. Instead, there are various ways of making (1a) true, and intensification (and other means of sharpening conversational goals) reduces the number of such ways. The following section provides one justification for this move.

3   Empirical advantages

3.1   Intensifiers

This account improves on the standard account of adnominal intensive reflexive (Eckardt 2001). For Eckardt, the intensive reflexive is simply an identity function (10a), but triggers focus alternatives; the alternatives of the complex expression are not alternative individuals, like with emphatic focus, but individuals returned by alternative functions applied to the same individual (10b). While the resulting alternative set is the same, Eckardt suggests the latter derivation derives centrality effects not observed with plain emphatic focus: in a sense, the alternatives are 'grouped around' John, when modified by *himself.*

(10)   a. $[\![\text{John himself}]\!]^{\text{o}} = \textsc{id}\,([\![\text{John}]\!]) = [\![\text{John}]\!] = \mathsf{j}$
       b. $[\![\text{John himself}]\!]^{\text{f}} = \{g\,(\mathsf{j}) \mid g \in \textsc{alt}(\textsc{id})\}$ $g :: \mathsf{e} \to \mathsf{e}$

Now consider that while (11a) is compatible with Ringo's statue being the sole occupant of the gallery, (11b) can only mean Ringo, the drummer is the sole occupant. This contrast cannot be explained by Eckardt's proposal, since the alternative set *Only* operates over is identical in both cases.

---

[3]This assumption will have to be suitably modified to account for discourse moves that 'merge' discourse referents, for instance in cases when conversational goals are loosened either through hedges, or some other linguistic means.

(11)   a. Only Ringo is in the gallery
       b. Only Ringo himself is in the gallery

On the present account however, since the use of an adnominal intensifier makes the distinctions between an individual and its representations contextually relevant, the representations too are members of the contextually determined alternative set. The centrality effects observed can still be derived à la Eckardt.

   In the system sketched in the previous section, there is a natural notion of contextual relevance: being an active discourse referent. On an alternative view of loose talk like Lasersohn's (1999) or Carter's (2021), relevance is a matter of absence from a pragmatic halo, or due to being inaccessible from the current world. Such a view has trouble explaining the felicity of (11b) when a janitor is going about his job in the gallery, in addition to Ringo being there. By treating statues and janitors alike, we lose a formal footing for the notion of relevant individuals.[4]

3.2   Indexiphors aren't loose

We also gain purchase on the behaviour of indexiphors in Telugu — pronouns which are morphologically third person, but trigger first person agreement (Sundaresan 2012; Messick 2017; Messick 2023; Deal 2020). Indexiphors, like shifted indexicals require a *de se* interpretation. However, while shifted indexicals can receive proxy readings (12), indexiphors cannot (13a). Note that when the same pronoun triggers third person agreement, proxy readings are generally available (14). Indexiphors also show sensitivity to order: the continuation in (13b) is infelicitous even though the pronoun triggers third person agreement. Like we saw earlier, sensitivity to order is not linked to the use of the same expression more than once, but rather reference to the same individual. If *tanu* in (13b) refers to someone other than Akhil (or his representations), proxy readings are again available, like with 'Chaplin' in (13b).

(12)   *Magahi*

anjaniyaa kahkai   ki   **ham** baṛhiyããã lagit hi
anjaniyaa said.3SG that 1SG   good   look be.1SG
'Anjani$_1$ said that she$_{1/P}$ looks good'   Deepak Alok p.c.

(13)   *Reporting on a trip Akhil and I took to a wax museum which has his statue*   (Telugu)

   a. Akhil **tanu** green room lo   unnaa-**nu** ani   annaaḍu
       akhil 3SG   green room LOC be-1SG   COMP said
       'Akhil$_1$ said that that he$_{1/*P/*2}$ was in the green room'

   b. … taravata, **tanu*P** chaplin pakkana unnaa-ḍu ani   čepæææḍu
       … later,   3SG   chaplin next   be-3MS   COMP said.PST.3SG
       'Later, he$_1$ said that he$_{1/*P/2}$ was next to Chaplin$_{3/P}$'

(14)   *(same context as above)*
       Akhil **tanu** green room lo   unnaa-**ḍu** ani   annaaḍu
       akhil 3SG   green room LOC be-3MS   COMP said
       'Akhil$_1$ said that that he$_{1/P/2}$ was in the green room'

Messick (2023) shows that it is the pronoun itself that triggers first person agreement, and argues that indexiphors have both third and first person features, with person features indexed to contexts (Schlenker 2003). Concretely, third person singular indexiphors are feature bundles of the following sort (D-BOUND indicates anaphoricity, −C is the embedded context and +C is the matrix context):

---

[4]A technique to record the history of halos or accessible worlds might answer this objection.

(15)   *Feature structure of indexiphors*   Messick 2023, p. 158
        [⟨+AUTHOR, −C⟩, ⟨−AUTHOR, −ADDRESSEE, +C⟩, -PLURAL, D-BOUND]

To account for the lack of proxy readings here, I suggest that indexiphors are pronouns with built-in regulators. It seems reasonable to treat the third person features as intensive, since the pronoun can still be used in the language as an intensifier of nominals. The reason the pronoun surfaces as third person, following Messick 2023, is a morphological fact about the language.

4   Conclusion

Proxy readings of nominals are a type of loose talk. They show the same empirical signature as other instances of loose talk. I argued that this behaviour can be captured by appealing to underspecified individuals, that can be split as the discourse progresses. This view helps better understand the behaviour of intensive reflexives—they make representations of their associate relevant—and indexiphors—nominals with built-in regulators.

An obvious way of taking this approach forward is to tie in the present account of loose talk about nominals to other instances of loose talk (about times, fictional entities, heights) to arrive at a general theory of loose talk that does justice to its sensitivity to order. Another lacuna of the present account is a compositional implementation of regulation. I leave both for future work.

References

Carter, Sam (2021). "The dynamics of loose talk". In: *Noûs* 55.1, pp. 171–198. URL: https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12306.

Deal, Amy Rose (2020). *A theory of indexical shift: Meaning, grammar, and crosslinguistic variation.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Eckardt, Regine (2001). "Reanalysing selbst". In: *Natural language semantics* 9.4, pp. 371–412.

Ghomeshi, Jila et al. (2004). "Contrastive focus reduplication in English (the salad-salad paper)". In: *Natural language & linguistic theory* 22, pp. 307–357.

Jackendoff, Ray (1992). "Mme. Tussaud meets the binding theory". In: *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 10.1, pp. 1–31. URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00135357.

Klecha, Peter (2018). "On unidirectionality in precisification". In: *Linguistics and Philosophy* 41, pp. 87–124.

Lasersohn, Peter (1999). "Pragmatic halos". In: *Language*, pp. 522–551. URL: https://doi.org/10.2307/417059.

Lewis, David (1979). "Scorekeeping in a Language Game". In: *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, pp. 339–359. URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00258436.

Messick, Troy (2017). "The morphosyntax of self-ascription: A cross-linguistic study". PhD thesis. Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut. URL: https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/dissertations/1621.

— (2023). "On apparent pronominal feature contradictions: Shifty agreement in Telugu". In: *Syntax* 26.2, pp. 137–182. URL: https://doi.org/10.1111/synt.12248.

Schlenker, Philippe (2003). "A plea for monsters". In: *Linguistics and philosophy* 26.1, pp. 29–120. URL: https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022225203544.

Shan, Chung-chieh (2015). "Splitting hairs". In: *Proceedings of the 20th Amsterdam Colloquium*, pp. 363–367.

Siu, Charlie (2023). "Interval-based dynamics of loose talk". In: *Synthese* 202.1, p. 10.

Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson (1985). "Loose talk". In: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society.* Vol. 86, pp. 153–171. URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4545042.

Sundaresan, Sandhya (2012). "Context and (co)reference in the syntax and its interfaces". PhD thesis. Universitetet i Tromsø and Universität Stuggart. URL: https://hdl.handle.net/10037/4835.