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Maier, Emar; de Schepper, Kees

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Emar Maier, Kees de Schepper – *University of Groningen, Radboud University Nijmegen*
Fake indexicals in Dutch: a counterexample to Kratzer 2009

emar.maier@gmail.com

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Kratzer (2009) notes that, while (1a) in German has only a strict reading (others don't care for my son), its English translation (1b) also allows a sloppy reading (others don't care for their sons):

- (1) a. Ich bin der Einzige, der meinen Sohn versorgt
b. I am the only one who takes care of my son

According to Kratzer, spelling out the sloppy LF requires finding a possessive and verb inflection compatible with both first and third person (i.e. gender) features (resulting from two chains of feature transmission). This leads to unresolvable conflicts in German. English spell-out encounters similar conflicts, but these are *resolvable* by appealing to the independent markedness of nominal gender and verbal person. Kratzer presents two arguments for nominal gender markedness: most English nouns are neuter, and English tends to avoid putting gender on bound pronouns, by resorting to plurals:

- (2) {Everybody/nobody} did their homework.

Verbal person is marked because the only verb that makes person distinctions is the copula -- a "quirk".

We observe that the Dutch equivalent of (1) allows an English-style sloppy reading. To test this intuition, we turned it into an acceptability judgment task by considering inherently reflexive predicates not admitting strict readings. A survey (12 items, 48 naïve Dutch participants, 5-point scale) confirms that sloppy first person possessives in constructions like (1) are fine in Dutch (in fact, (3) was rated much higher than the predicted variants with third person possessive):

- (3) Ben ik de enige die m'n {best doet / belangstelling toont / fouten toegeeft}?
'Am I the only one who {does my best / shows my interest / admits my mistakes}?'

Spelling out the sloppy readings for these Dutch sentences we'd run into the same spell-out conflicts as before. So, we'd need the two markedness principles. However, in Dutch, as opposed to English, all nouns are marked for gender (cf. definite articles: *de* [m/f] vs *het* [n]). In addition, Dutch doesn't allow plurals for gender avoidance in (2):

- (4) {Iedereen/Niemand} heeft {zijn ['his'] /*hun ['their']} huiswerk gedaan.

Hence, Dutch gender seems no more marked than German.

Likewise for verbal person. While in English there is only one quirky person-sensitive verb, most singular verb inflections in Dutch crucially depend on one or more person features:

(5) present tense inflection of *doe-* ('do')

1.sg ↔ -∅
2.sg ↔ -*t* (-∅ under inversion)
m/n/f.sg ↔ -*t*
elsewhere ↔ -*n*

Even ignoring the [2.sg]-specific word-order effect, we cannot lump second and third person together into a single person-free spell-out rule, 'sg ↔ -*t*', because that would incorrectly generate *ik ben de enige die m'n huiswerk doe* ('I am the only one who do.1sg my.1sg homework') for the sloppy [m.1.sg] LF.

To sum up, none of Kratzer's reasons for the markedness of nominal gender and verbal person apply to Dutch, so her theory would predict Dutch to behave like German: sloppy first person means [m.1.sg], which cannot be spelled out, predicting ungrammaticality for (3) as for (1a). Our survey shows that this prediction is not borne out.

Reference

Kratzer, A. (2009) "Making a pronoun: fake indexicals as windows into the properties of pronouns." *Linguistic Inquiry* 40, 187–237.