

A hitherto unnoticed sloppy reading of proper names

Mina, a staunch Republican, thinks Trump could not be any better than he is and Obama could not be any worse. In Hebrew, (1) is an acceptable albeit somewhat cheeky summary of Mina's opinions, and six of thirteen English speakers we consulted similarly accepted (2a-b).

- (1) Im Trump lo haya Trump, hayity uli ohev oto paxot, aval im
If Trump NEG been Trump, would.1SG maybe like him less, but if
Obama lo haya Δ , hayity ohev oto yoter
Obama NEG been, would.1SG like him more
- (2) a. If Trump hadn't been Trump, I might've liked him less, but...
b. %If Obama hadn't Δ , I probably would've liked him more.
- (3) Δ = been Obama

One occurrence of “*Trump*” in (1-2) c-commands the other, so the two cannot co-refer without violating binding condition C. Indeed, while the first occurrence of the name is referential, picking out the individual Donald Trump, the second seems to be used predicatively to denote the property of being *Trump-like*. Most surprisingly, (1-2) truthfully represent Mina's opinions only if the ellipsis site is resolved as in (3), contributing not the property of being *Trump-like*, but rather that of being *Obama-like*. In other words, the predicatively-used name must have a *sloppy reading*.

Yet, while pronouns have sloppy reading under ellipsis and contrastive focus (4a-b), names generally do not (5a-b) (Geach 1962; Witten 1970). Notably, even some English speakers who find (2a-b) odd, still find sloppy ellipsis-resolution there easier than in (5a-b).

- (4) a. Jie saw her parents. Aya also did Δ . (Δ = see Aya's parents)
b. Only Jie saw her parents. No one else saw their own parents.
- (5) a. Jie's mother thinks Jie left. Aya's mother also does Δ . ($\Delta \neq$ think Aya left)
b. Only Jie pities Jie. #No one else pities themselves.

Examples (1-2) differ from other known exceptions to the generalization that names and other non-pronominal referring expressions lack sloppy readings. For instance, Roeper (2006) notes that the name in the contrastive focus structure in (6) can be understood sloppily, with the sentence meaning roughly “only Jie (in the photo), looks like Jie (now)” (cf. Bassi 2019). But the example does not generalize beyond contrastive focus to ellipsis (7), even in a structure parallel to (2a-b), like (8).

- (6) In this old photo, only Jie looks like Jie. No one else looks like *themselves*.
- (7) In this photo, Jie looks like Jie. Jan doesn't Δ . ($\Delta \neq$ look like Jan)
- (8) If Jie hadn't still looked like Jie, I wouldn't have recognized her in this photo. #If Jan hadn't Δ , I would've. I've known him for years.

Note further that the sloppily-interpreted name in (6) is not used predicatively, unlike those in (1-2). This also sets our cases apart from another potentially-related case involving epithets, which together with names are often treated as prototypical referring expressions, but that unlike other such expressions *do* exhibit sloppy readings (Potts et al. 2009). For instance, (9)—due to a reviewer—can convey that no-one who visited Bill said *Bill* was happy.

- (9) Everyone who visited John said the damn fool was happy,
but no-one who visited Bill did Δ .

The epithet here is individual-denoting, with its referent presumably varying between antecedent and ellipsis site, whereas in our cases of sloppily-interpreted names, it is a *property* that is subject to this variation.

Here is a first stab at *describing* the features of (1-2) that render their sloppy interpretation available. Having the sloppily-interpreted name occupy a predicative position is necessary, but insufficient; (10) lacks a sloppy reading, despite extensive evidence in Matushansky 2008 that the complement position of naming verbs like “*name*” or “*baptize*” is predicative. Rather, the predicatively-used name must contribute a *particular* property, that of exhibiting typical behavior or character traits of its contextually salient bearer. And even that is not enough. Counterfactuality, too, seems necessary; non-counterfactual (11) lacks a sloppy reading, despite the appropriate predicative use of the name “*Clinton*” (counterfactuality, rather than intensionality more generally, seems required, as can be deduced from the inability of the attitude “*think*” in (11) to license the reading).

- (10) Donald named his kid Donald. Obama didn't Δ . ($\Delta \neq$ name his kid Obama)
- (11) In the final debate, Trump wasn't Trump. (He behaved different than he typically does.) And I think Clinton wasn't $\{\checkmark$ Clinton / # $\Delta\}$, either. (Her behavior was also completely atypical.)

Why these features should conspire to give rise to sloppy readings, I do not know. For now, a descriptive generalization is the best I can do.

References

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