Appearance Reports and the Acquaintance Inference

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Keywords: Semantics, pragmatics, copy raising, perception, experimental linguistics

1. Overview Some assertions give rise to what Ninan (2014) calls the *acquaintance inference* (AI): the inference that the speaker is acquainted with some individual. Discussion of the acquaintance inference has previously focused on assertions about aesthetics and personal taste, as in (1); but it also arises with appearance reports, as in (2).

(1) **A:** The cake is tasty.
⇝ A has tasted the cake.

(2) **A:** Tom seems like he's cooking.
⇝ A has seen Tom.

While the AI with appearance reports is acknowledged (Pearson 2013, Ninan 2014), it has not yet been adequately explored. Appearance reports give rise to variable acquaintance behavior, with no analog in the previously discussed domains. We present experimental evidence that the acquaintance inference with appearance reports depends on the clause embedded under the appearance verb, 'seem'. We also explain how this result is relevant for extant proposals about the semantics of appearance reports.

2. Two types of acquaintance inference The appearance report in (2) is a *copy raising* (CR) construction. These constructions are characterized by having a substantive DP subject, and an embedded 'like'-clause containing a pronoun that corefers with it. A contrast has been observed between CR reports and their *expletive subject* (ES) variants, as in (3) (Asudeh & Toivonen 2012, Rogers 1972).

(3) **A:** It seems like Tom is cooking.
⇝ A has seen something relevant to whether Tom is cooking.

If A doesn't see Tom, but sees his kitchen with preparations for dinner apparently underway, the ES report in (3) is appropriate, but the CR report in (2) is not. To characterize this situation, we introduce a distinction between two types of acquaintance inference: first, the *specific AI* that the speaker is acquainted with the specific individual denoted by the subject; second, the *general AI* that the speaker is acquainted with something or other relevant to the truth of the embedded claim. Assertions about personal taste, as in (1), as well as the CR report in (2), give rise to the specific AI; the ES report in (3) only gives rise to the general one.

The previous two examples may suggest that CR reports all have the specific AI, while ES ones have the general. But this generalization would be too quick. Some CR reports also only give rise to the general acquaintance inference. If A walks into Tom's kitchen and notices vegetables partially chopped on the cutting board, all exactly even, and a perfectly-cooked roast cooling on the counter, they can make either report in (4), even if Tom isn't present.

(4) a. Tom seems like he's an experienced cook.
b. It seems like Tom is an experienced cook.

Why do some CR reports give rise to the specific inference, and some only to the general?

3. The SLP/ILP Hypothesis There are likely many factors influencing the acquaintance behavior of copy raising reports. Here, we offer evidence for one novel generalization: CR reports with embedded *stage-level predicates* (SLPs) give rise to the specific AI; those with *individual-level predicates* (ILPs) give rise only to the general AI.[1]

This hypothesis is supported by experiments comparing three minimal ES/CR pairs with embedded SLPs, and three with ILPs. Sample stimuli are given below (fig. 1). Subjects rated the correctness of the speaker's utterance in the scenario, on a scale from 1 ("definitely not correct") to 7 ("definitely correct").

[1] Examples of SLPs are 'is cooking' and 'is upset'; of ILPs, 'is an experienced cook' and 'is well-organized'. One diagnostic is that bare plural subjects of SLPs (as in, e.g., 'Students are cooking') have existential interpretations, while those of ILPs (as in, e.g., 'Students are experienced cooks') have generic interpretations. See Carlson 1977, Chierchia 1995.

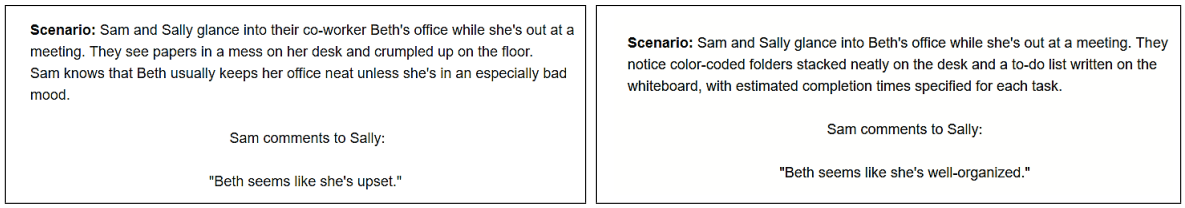

Figure 1: Experimental CR reports with SLP (left) and ILP (right)

With SLPs, we found a significant effect of sentence type on speakers' judgments of utterance correctness, in contexts where the relevant individual was not perceived.[2] However, with the ILP pairs, there was no effect: the CR and ES reports were equally acceptable.[3]

Moreover, the SLP/ILP Hypothesis may have a functional rationale. Appearance reports are used to express that one has appearance-based evidence for some state of affairs, specified in the embedded clause. Since SLPs denote properties presumed to hold more transiently, perception of the individual the claim is about tends to be better evidence than perception of some scene not containing that individual. For example, perceptual evidence for someone cooking or being upset will generally be better if it is perception of that person; perception of some scene that may suggest that the relevant state of affairs holds, but doesn't include the individual, will tend to be worse. Thus, it makes sense for reports embedding SLPs to have a way to mark this distinction in evidential situation. Reserving CR reports for the special case of direct perception of the target individual would do this (cf. Rett & Hyams 2014). Since ILPs denote properties that individuals have in a more standing way, there is less of a contrast between the evidential power of perception of that individual, compared with perception of some other scene. Thus, reports with embedded ILPs don't call for the same contrast between the two kinds of perceptual situations the speaker may be in, and so don't reserve CR reports for just one of them.

4. Relevance to previous work Recent literature on the semantics of CR constructions addresses the question of whether they assign the role of *perceptual source* (p-source) to the matrix subject. Underlying this debate is what we call the *AI/P-Source Assumption*: The subject of a CR report is interpreted as p-source if and only if the report gives rise to the specific AI. Asudeh & Toivonen (2012) and Rett & Hyams (2014) take all CR reports to have the specific AI, and hence endorse a uniform analysis that takes them all to interpret the subject as p-source. By contrast, cases of CR reports that don't have the specific AI lead Landau (2011) and Doran (2015) to offer a non-uniform account on which CR subjects sometimes do and sometimes don't have the p-source role. But the key question of why some CR report is interpreted one way or the other goes unanswered.

Under the AI/P-Source Assumption, the SLP/ILP Hypothesis advanced here lends support to a non-uniform account, while also taking an important step towards giving a systematic answer to the question of which CR reports get interpreted which way.

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[2]For the pair with 'cooking': $F(1, 111) = 14.81, p < .001$ (as homogeneity of variance could not be assumed, we also report the Welch statistic: $F(1, 72.4) = 12.89, p = .001$); 'upset': $F(1, 103.43) = 5.41, p = .02$ (Welch); 'playing outside': $F(1, 116) = 13.22, p < .001$.

[3]For the pair with 'an experienced cook': $F(1, 131) = .91, p = .34$; 'well-organized': $F(1, 124) = .46, p = .5$; 'enjoys arts and crafts': $F(1, 116) = .75, p = .39$.