Different as a lexical reciprocal: evidence from co-occurrence with neat mass nouns

Alon Fishman (Tel Aviv University)

This study is concerned with a particular reading of adjectives like different – here called the plural-dependent reading – which has been analyzed as a reciprocal construction (Beck 2000). I present novel data showing that this reading is available with a subclass of lexical mass nouns, specifically neat mass nouns (Landman 2011). On the basis of this data I argue, contra Beck’s original proposal, that the plural-dependent reading cannot involve the adjective taking a covert reciprocal pronoun as a complement. Instead, I propose to analyze it as a principally different type of reciprocal construction, namely one headed by a lexical reciprocal item (Siloni 2012).

Background: I focus here on sentences like (1a), under the reading given in (2).

A structural and semantic similarity between plural-dependent different and reciprocal constructions was first pointed out by Moltmann (1992), and implemented in a straightforward way in Beck’s (2000) analysis. She considers different to be a relational adjective, which can take a covert reciprocal pronoun as its complement. The plural-dependent reading of (1a) is then considered to be functionally equivalent to sentence (3).

(3) John and Bill were born in countries which are different from each other.

Novel data: In the present study, I show that the plural-dependent reading is available not only when different modifies a plural count noun, but also when it modifies certain lexical mass nouns. Specifically, the reading arises when different modifies neat mass nouns, i.e. nouns with denotations composed of atomic building blocks (Chierchia 1998, Landman 2011). That is the case in the naturally-occurring examples in (4). In contrast, the reading doesn’t arise when different modifies other mass nouns, i.e. ones with “atomless” denotations, as in (5).

(4) a. I mean, we’re alike but we aren’t. We like different furniture.
   b. I let my bridesmaids wear different jewelry to break the matchy-matchy up.

(5) a. #John and Bill ate different meat.
   b. #John and Bill drank different milk.

The data in (4) present a challenge to Beck’s (2000) analysis. Taken at face value, her account predicts that plural-dependent readings would only be available when an overt reciprocal pronoun is grammatical. However, a lexical mass noun cannot be the antecedent of an overt reciprocal pronoun, as demonstrated by the ungrammaticality of the sentences in (6).

(6) a. *We like furniture which is/are different from each other.
   b. *I let my bridesmaids wear jewelry which is/are different from each other.

Moreover, Beck’s account predicts that plural-dependent readings would always be equivalent to uses with an overt reciprocal pronoun. I claim that this is not the case. Gillon (1992) observes that sentences with a reciprocal pronoun anteceded by a conjunction of neat mass nouns, can only convey that the reciprocal relation holds between the conjuncts; not between the parts of either conjunct. Thus, sentence (7a) cannot support the state of affairs in (8). In
contrast, I show here that plural-dependent uses of *different* can in fact convey that the reciprocal relation holds within conjuncts, i.e. between the parts of each conjunct. Thus, sentence (7b) does support the state of affairs in (8).

(7) a. John and Bill bought drapery and carpeting which are different from each other.
    b. John and Bill bought different drapery and carpeting.

(8) John’s drapery is different than Bill’s drapery; John’s carpeting is different than Bill’s carpeting.

**Analysis:** The data exemplified in (4), (6) and (7-8) suggest that we should distinguish between plural-dependent readings and uses of *different* with an overt reciprocal pronoun. I propose to view this distinction in terms of an established distinction — usually discussed in relation to verbs — between lexical and periphrastic reciprocal constructions (Siloni 2012, see also Dimitriadis 2008, Bar-Asher Siegal 2015).

My proposal makes two predictions: first, that the contrasts identified above would apply not only to adjectives like *different*, but also to lexically-reciprocal verbs such as *match* and *collide*. Second, that established semantic properties of lexically-reciprocal predicates, e.g. the unavailability of an “I”-reading (e.g. Siloni 2012), would also apply to plural-dependent readings of adjectives like *different*. Both of these predictions are indeed borne out.

Formally, I follow Landman (2011) in assuming that the parts of a neat mass noun’s denotation may be accessible during semantic derivation (cf. Chierchia 1998). This straightforwardly captures the availability of plural-dependent readings with neat mass nouns, under various formulations of the semantics of lexical reciprocals (e.g. Dimitriadis 2008, Siloni 2012, Winter 2018).

I stipulate that the incompatibility of lexical mass nouns with reciprocal pronouns, is due to a particular property of reciprocal pronouns. The cases with a conjunction of neat mass nouns rule out a purely structural condition. And the availability of plural-dependent readings without the reciprocal pronoun, point away from an analysis in terms of semantic type mismatch. Instead, I suggest the following: a reciprocal pronoun denotes an operation that applies to an object which is presupposed to be grammatically plural. In support of this proposal, I present an independent case where a similar requirement is needed.