"Descriptive Readings" of Noun Phrases
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I. Introduction

A. Terminology

1. *pure indexicals*: 'I', 'today', 'now'.

2. *demonstratives*: 'he', 'you', 'that'.

3. *indexicals*: both pure indexicals and demonstratives.

B. "Descriptive Uses"

1. Indexicals all have uses where they are used to talk about particular people, times, places, etc.

a. As Nunberg [1993] pointed out, they also have uses in which they allow the sentences they occur in to convey claims that don't *seem* to be about particular people, times, places and so on:

1. (uttered by Glenn standing at the newly opened door, scolding Tracy for opening the door so readily when she heard the doorbell) 'I could have been a murderer!'

2. (uttered pointing at the Pope) 'He's usually Italian.'

3. (uttered by a condemned prisoner) 'I am traditionally allowed to order whatever I want for my last meal.'

2. The (relevant) claims conveyed by 1-3.

a. 1 has a use on which it conveys something like the claim that the person at the door could have been a murderer (instead of Glenn—as opposed to the use on which it conveys the claim that Glenn could have been a murderer).

b. 2 has a use on which it conveys something like the claim that more often than not the Pope has been Italian.

c. 3 has a use on which it conveys a claim that seems true, even given that there are no traditions that deal specifically with the utterer of 3.

3. *Descriptive readings*: the relevant claims these sentences can be used to convey

4. *Modal*, *Q adverb* and *Regulative* examples.

5. Our task: explain how these descriptive readings arise.

II. Regulative Examples

 3. (uttered by a condemned prisoner) 'I am traditionally allowed to order whatever I want for my last meal.'

A. The puzzle: 3 seems true even though the traditions in question say nothing about the speaker.

B. There is good evidence that 'I' in 3 is referring to the speaker as usual on the relevant reading.

1. The following sentence is felicitous and the second conjunct appears to predicate *having decided on tacos* of the speaker:

3+. I am traditionally allowed to eat whatever I want for my last meal and have decided on tacos.

C. Second, sentences containing regulatives and *names or quantifiers* instead of indexicals (as in 3) have descriptive readings in the sense that they generate the same puzzle 3 does.

4. Remember, Mr. Rowland is traditionally allowed to eat whatever he wants for his last meal.

5. Every man is this room is traditionally allowed to eat whatever he wants for his last meal.

1. There are two readings of 5 resulting from giving the quantifier wide and narrow scope relative to 'traditionally':

5a. Every man in this room: x[traditionally [x is allowed to eat whatever he wants for his last meal.]]

5b. Traditionally [every man in this room: x[x is allowed to eat whatever he wants for his last meal]]

a. 5b seems bound to be false since the relevant tradition makes no pronouncement about every man in the room in question.

b. This means 5's true descriptive reading must be given by 5a.

c. But 5a appears to assert of each man in the room that tradition says something about him; and it doesn't.

d. So we have the same puzzle here that we have in the case of 3 and 4: why does 5 read as 5a seems true?

D. An Account of Regulative examples.

1. 3 can be viewed as being of the form 'Traditionally, P'.

a. 'Traditionally, P' is equivalent to 'Tradition dictates that P'.

b. Hence, for all intents and purposes 3 can be recast as:

3R. (uttered by a condemned prisoner) 'Tradition dictates that I am allowed to order whatever I want for my last meal.'

i. 3R, like 3, appears to assert a relation ("dictating") between a tradition and a proposition.

2. Digression on *say* ascriptions

a. My friend Glenn tells me one day that every sibling of his passed the Bar Exam that day, but says nothing about individual siblings.

i. That night I meet Glenn's sister Chris at a party in Chelsea.

ii. After learning she is Glenn's sister, I say:

6. Glenn said that you passed the Bar Exam.

b. This ascription seems true even if we imagine that Glenn has never uttered a sentence such as 'Chris passed the Bar Exam' or (speaking to Chris) 'You passed the Bar Exam' or etc.

i. 6 seems true, but is it?

ii. Assume the complement of 6 expresses in context the singular proposition that Chris passed the bar exam.

iii. Does Glenn stand in the *saying* relation to that proposition?

iv. It may be that one can stand in the *saying* relation to a proposition without uttering a sentence that (relative to the context in which it was uttered) expresses that proposition.

v. *explicitly say*: the relation that obtains between a person s and a proposition P just in case s has uttered a sentence that (relative to the context of utterance) has P as its content.

c. Outline of an explanation as to why 6 seems true.

i. Glenn explicitly said that all his siblings passed the Bar Exam.

ii. Chris is one of Glenn's siblings.

iii. Hence, Glenn explicitly said something that in the context of utterance transparently commits him to Chris having passed the Bar Exam. This makes 6 seem true in that context.

3. The same thing occurs in the case of 3 and 3R above.

a. The idea is that just as people *explicitly say* things, so traditions *explicitly dictate* things.

b. We can imagine that the tradition being invoked in 3/3R explicitly dictates that every condemned prisoner is allowed to order whatever he wants for his last meal.

i. In 3/3R the fact that the tradition in question *explicitly dictates* that each condemned prisoner is allowed to order whatever he wants for his last meal makes it seem true that the tradition in question *dictates* that a specific person is so allowed, given that the person is a condemned prisoner.

4. The explanation of why 4 seems true is exactly similar.

5. As to 5, the explanation is again similar.

a. Suppose that, as before, Glenn explicitly said that each of his siblings passed the Bar Exam (by uttering 'Each of my siblings passed the Bar Exam'), while explicitly saying nothing about them individually.

i. I encounter all and only his siblings sitting at a table celebrating. I say:

7. Glenn said that everyone at this table passed the Bar Exam.

ii. Surely, this seems true.

iii. On the reading of 7 where 'everyone at this table' takes wide scope, this sentence asserts that everyone at this table is such that Glenn said of him/her that he/she passed the Bar Exam. By the previous explanation of why 6 seems true, we know how, for each sibling x, it will seem true that Glenn said x passed the Bar. So we have an explanation of why 7 seems true.

iv. A similar explanation works for 5.

III. Q Adverb Examples

2. (uttered pointing at Pope) 'He's usually Italian.'

A. Five points about Q adverb examples

1. First, Q adverb examples are hard to generate with indexicals like 'I', 'you', 'we', names or quantifiers.

a. Thus, though 2 is fine, the following do not have the relevant readings:

21. (uttered by the Vice President) 'I am usually a member of the same party as the

President.'

22. (uttered to the Vice President) 'You are usually a member of the same party as the

President.'

23. (uttered by a Cabinet member) 'We are usually members of the same party as the

President.'

24. 'Ryan is sometimes a member of the same party as the President.'

25. I could have been a murder!

26. You could have been a murderer!

27. We could have been murderers!

2. Second, it seems that the indexicals that work best in Q adverb examples are those that can be anaphoric: 'he', 'she', 'it', and 'they' generate Q adverb examples readily. 'I', 'we', 'you', names and quantifiers do not generate Q adverb examples easily.

3. A third point regarding Q adverb examples is that they can be quite hard to generate even using the expressions that *can* be used to generate them and which *can* function as anaphors.

a. This contrasts with both regulative and modal examples. It is easy to get the descriptive reading of the following in the situation described above:

8a. He could have been a murderer!

b. However, suppose I have a guest and you appear at the door. I answer without hesitating and my guest wonders how I could be so careless. I say:

28. He's never a murderer.

4. Fourth, there is evidence that indexicals in them are *not* simply functioning as terms referring to the relevant individuals, again unlike the cases of regulative examples.

a. The following is infelicitous, where we try to give the first conjunct a descriptive reading and the second conjunct predicates something of Jorge Bergoglio:

29. (uttered pointing at the Pope) 'He's usually Italian and was ordained in 1969.'

i. If 'He' in 29 referred to Jorge Bergoglio, the sentence should be felicitous.

5. Fifth, when we try to get descriptive readings in sentences like our Q adverb examples *except that they are missing the Q adverbs*, it is quite hard to do so.

a. It is easy to get the descriptive reading of our example 2:

2. (uttered pointing at the Pope) 'He's usually Italian.'

b. However, when we delete the adverb, it is hard to get the descriptive reading:

2-. (uttered pointing at the Pope) 'He's Italian.'

B. Beginnings of the positive account: consider the following example of discourse anaphora

30. The Pope$_1$ is the head of the Roman Catholic Church. He's$_1$ usually Italian.

1. The second sentence here clearly has a descriptive reading. How does it come about?

a. Assume that the definite description in the first sentence of 30 is a generalized quantifier.

b. On some theories of discourse anaphora, when an anaphoric pronoun is anaphoric on a quantifier in another sentence, the pronoun itself has the semantics of a quantifier.

c. Let's suppose that in this case, the anaphoric pronoun has the semantics of the quantifier/description that is its antecedent.

i. On such a theory of anaphora, the second sentence of 30 will be equivalent to 'The Pope is usually Italian'.

ii. On the reading where the pronoun qua quantifier takes narrow scope under 'usually', we will get the descriptive reading.

2. The same effect without using a *whole sentence* containing the antecedent for the pronoun:

31. The Pope…he's usually Italian.

3. Suppose you and I mutually recognize that we are looking at a big sign that says 'The Pope!':

32. He's usually Italian.

4. Suppose we mutually recognize that we are looking at a picture of the Pope or even a Pope bobble head.

a. Again, I could utter 32 and have it interpreted the way the same sentence is in 30.

i. The picture or bobble head makes the role of being the Pope salient; and that is sufficient to license the pronoun with the same interpretation that the anaphoric pronoun has in 30.

iii. I'll call the phenomenon involved in cases like the bobble head or picture cases instances of *implicit anaphora*.

b. There are other instances of processes that are generally linguistically triggered, but sometimes can be triggered in context in other ways: NP deletion.

i. Generally, NP deletion requires an identical NP antecedent, as in:

33. Joanna bought some books and Stella bought some too.

ii. However, sometimes one can get NP deletion without an explicit linguistic antecedent.

iii. Elbourne [2005] mentions the case of two people being in a yard filled with barking dogs, where neither has said anything. One person then says

34. Harry's is particularly noisy.

meaning Harry's *dog* is particularly noisy.

vi. The following examples show that merely making the relevant kind of thing salient doesn't license NP deletion

 35a. Joanna has a husband and Stella's is standing over there.

35b. *Joanna is married to a man and Stella's is standing over there.

c. Many of the same points could be made regarding VP ellipsis. As was the case with NP deletion, VP ellipsis generally requires an identical VP antecedent:

42. Isabel will bring cake and Amy will too.

i. However, here again VP ellipsis can be licensed in context with no explicit antecedent.

ii. Imagine that children are lined up entering their swimming class and as each enters, he or she is given the opportunity to jump off the high dive. We are watching silently as the first child declines the offer to jump. My niece Eliza is next in line. Knowing her cautious nature, I say

43. Eliza won't either.

meaning that Eliza won't jump off the high dive either.

iii. The utterance is felicitous. Somehow the first child obviously not jumping off the high dive licenses the VP ellipsis.

iv. As was the case with NP deletion, it isn't easy to get VP ellipsis in such cases and there isn't much to say systematically about cases in which you can get it and cases in which you can't.

C. It is probably clear by now that I am claiming that our Q adverb example 2, repeated here,

2. (uttered pointing at the Pope) 'He's usually Italian.

is also a case of implicit anaphora.

1. Here the Pope himself makes the Pope role salient and licenses the pronoun with the same interpretation it has in the following example:

2+. The Pope…he's usually Italian.

D. Understanding Q adverb examples as instances of implicit anaphora explains the five points noted earlier about such examples.

IV. Modal Examples: a few points

1. (uttered by Glenn standing at the newly opened door, scolding Tracy for opening the door so readily when she heard the doorbell) 'I could have been a murderer!'

A. Epistemic vs. metaphysical modal examples

1. In this example the modal appears epistemic.

2. However, in other modal examples the modal appears metaphysical.

a. After Bush's election in 2004, noting how close the election was, I can point at Bush and say 'He might have been a Democrat' thereby conveying the claim that the election might have gone differently with the result that Kerry won.

B. As with regulative examples, modal examples containing names instead of indexicals have descriptive readings.

4. (uttered to Steve after he answered the doorbell hastily in a very bad part of town, where a friend—Josh—turned out to be at the door (sentence a uttered pointing at Josh))

a. Are you crazy? He could have been a murderer!

b. Are you crazy? Josh could have been a murderer.

1. Clearly, 4b, like 4a, has a reading on it conveys something like the claim that the person who just rang the doorbell could have been a murderer (instead of Josh).

2. Just as the relevant reading of 1 could be true even if Tracey knows that Glenn isn't a murderer, so the relevant reading of 4a/b could be true even if Steve knows Josh isn't a murderer.

C. As with regulative examples, sentences containing quantifiers instead of names or indexicals give rise to descriptive readings in modal examples.

1. Suppose that aliens have invaded Earth and disguise themselves as humans in order to corner and kill unsuspecting humans.

a. Most people take precautions and are suspicious of strangers. You come to visit me one day and I have many knocks on my door, each of which I immediately answer without hesitation. Each visitor turns out to be a harmless (human) student. Despite this, you scold me saying:
5. You are going to be killed by aliens if you aren't more careful. Every human student who visited you today could have been an alien killer.

b. The second sentence of 5 has a reading on which it conveys something like the claim that for all we knew, the roles occupied by the human creatures who in fact visited me today (the roles of knocking on my door at various times) were instead occupied by completely different creatures who were alien killers.

c. On the relevant reading, the second sentence of 5 could be true even if I knew of each student that he/she is not an alien killer.

D. A third feature of modal examples is that when one moves away from sentences of a very specific syntactic structure, the descriptive readings become unavailable or significantly degraded.

1. The favored form for modal examples is:

6. I/N/Q could have been a(n) F/the F/N

where I is an indexical, N is a name, Q is a quantifier, a(n) F is an indefinite and the F is a definite description.

a. Thus we have:

6a. He could have been a murderer.
6b. Ted could have been a murder.
6c. Every student who visited today could have been an alien killer.
6d. You could have been the murderer at large.
6e. You could have been Ross.

b. For 6e, imagine Annie explaining why she rushed to put her robe on when her husband entered the room, where Ross is a houseguest.

c. Now consider the following:

7a. A mob boss could have been paying Ted to kill me.
7b. A mob boss could have been paying him [indicating Ted] to kill me.

i. Suppose these are uttered by Annie explaining why she was hesitant to open the door when unbeknownst to her Ted, whom she knows not to be in the employ of a mob boss, was knocking.

ii. It is very hard to get descriptive readings here on which e.g. 7a conveys the claim that a mob boss could have been paying the person knocking at the door to kill Annie.

iii. Further confirmation of this point comes from comparing the following to 6d, where we imagine it is known that there is a murderer at large and I am explaining why I hesitated to open the door when you knocked (again, assume I know you are not the murderer at large):

7c. The murderer at large could have been you.

iv. Whereas 6d easily allows the descriptive reading on which it conveys something like the claim that the person knocking at the door could have been the murderer at large (instead of you), 7c simply does not allow such a reading.

E. I won't have time to defend this view today, but I think descriptive readings of modal examples are idiomatic readings of the sentences.

1. Specifically, the interpretation of the sentence 'could' embeds is systematically shifted.

2. This occurs by shifting the interpretations of indexicals, names and quantifiers in those embedded sentences.

3. This shift in interpretation amounts to the expressions taking on idiomatic meanings.

V. 'Today', 'now', 'here', etc.

A. I said the indexicals that work best in Q adverb examples are those that have anaphoric uses.

1. But there are counterexamples to this claim.

2. 'Today', 'tomorrow', 'here', 'now' and other indexicals generate Q adverb examples, as the following example shows, but they do not function as anaphors:[1]

36. (uttered on December 31, 2010) 'Today is always the biggest party day of the year.'

36a. December 31 is always the biggest party day of the year.

B. However, 'today' can be used to talk about things like December 31, the last day of school, Friday or other such things *even in simple sentences*, as the following examples show.

37a. (uttered on the last day of school for the year) '<u>Today</u> is my favorite day of the year.'
37b. '<u>The last day of school</u> is my favorite day of the year.'

38a. (uttered on Friday) '<u>Today</u> is my favorite day of the week.'
38b. '<u>Friday</u> is my favorite day of the week.'

39a. (uttered November 9, 2010) '<u>Today</u> is the day the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.'
39b. '<u>November 9</u> is the day the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.'

1. Let's put the fact that 'today' in the a sentences above can have the significance of the underlined expressions in the b sentences by saying that 'today' (and 'here', 'now' etc.) can have *descriptive readings in simple sentences* (i.e. sentences lacking elements like 'traditionally', 'could have been' and 'always').

2. So the explanation of the descriptive reading in the Q adverb example 36 is that 'today' is in general capable of having descriptive readings, as in 37-39, and in 36 it has the significance of 'December 31'. [2]

C. Given that expressions like 'today' have descriptive readings in even simple sentences, it won't be surprising to find that we can generate regulative and modal examples with them too:

40. (uttered the day after Thanksgiving) 'Today traditionally marks the beginning of the Christmas shopping season.'

41. (uttered on July 3 while claiming that the Declaration of Independence might have been adopted one day earlier) 'Today could have been Independence Day.'

1. Here again, I claim that the descriptive readings result from 'today' having the sort of descriptive reading that it is capable of having in simple sentences like 37-39 above.

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[1] This is similar to an example from Nunberg [1993].
[2] See King [2001] for an account of the semantics of expressions like 'December 31'.

D. I've said that the descriptive readings of 36, 40 and 41 arise in part because 'today' can have the significance of 'December 31', 'the day after Thanksgiving' and so on, just as it can in simple sentences like 37-39.

E. We are claiming that the descriptive readings of 36, 40 and 41 are generated differently from the descriptive readings of regulative, modal and Q adverb examples discussed in previous sections of the paper. Evidence for this claim?

 1. First, as indicated, 'today', 'now' and so on have descriptive readings in simple sentences, whereas the indexicals in our other examples generally do not.

a. This latter point was noted for examples like 2- above.

42. (uttered by the condemned prisoner) 'I am having whatever I want for my last meal.'

43. (uttered by Glenn after Tracey opens the door) 'I am (not) a murderer.'

2. Second, 'today' etc. behave differently in modal examples than other indexicals.

a. In our discussion of modal examples above, we noted that the descriptive readings arise primarily with sentences of a very specific structure, namely:

6. I/N/Q could have been a(n) F/the F/N

As we saw, the further we move away from sentences of this structure, the harder it is to get descriptive readings (see 7a-c above).

b. However, this simply is not the case with 'today' and etc., as the following example shows

44. (uttered March 30, 2010) 'Ronald Reagan could have died today in 1981.'

c. Further, sentences of the form of 6 with indexicals that are not 'today' are paraphrasable as

6a. An F/the F/N could have been the R instead of NP.

where *the R* is somehow fixed in the context of utterance (*the person at the door* in 6a,b above).

i. However, modal examples of the form of 6 containing 'today' in general cannot be so paraphrased:

41. (uttered on July 3) 'Today could have been Independence Day.'

is not properly paraphrased as:

41a. Independence Day could have been occurring now instead of today.

d. That modal examples involving 'today' behave differently from other modal examples surely is strong evidence that they are generated differently.

3. Finally, we noted that for regulative examples, things like the following were felicitous:

3+. I am traditionally allowed to eat whatever I want for my last meal and have decided on tacos.

a. The crucial point here was that the second conjunct is clearly predicating a property of the utterer of the sentences, which is the usual referent of 'I'.

40+. (uttered the day after Thanksgiving 2010) *'Today traditionally marks the beginning of the Christmas shopping season and is unseasonably warm.'