



Unspeakable Sentences: Book 2

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UNSPEAKABLE SENTENCES:
BOOK 2
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Speakers with vivid imaginations have often objected to starred sentences with apparently well-formed surface structures, claiming that they could easily say them, and going on to describe situations where the putatively ungrammatical sentences would be appropriate, at times even the only appropriate thing to say. However, there exist classes of sentences which for morphological reasons are unacceptable, although they are semantically well-formed, and appear to follow all agreement rules.

I. Consider the following sentences:

- (1) ?One or more transformations change meaning.
- (2) ?One or more transformations changes meaning.
- (3) ?There is one or more transformations which change(s) meaning.
- (4) ?There are one or more transformations which change meaning.

Where there is no possible number inflection on the verb, there is no difficulty:

- (5) John claimed that one or more transformations changed meaning.
- (6) John proved that there existed one or more meaning-changing transformations.
- (7) John proved that there $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} ?were \\ ?was \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ one or more meaning-changing transformations.
- (8) John believes there to be one or more meaning-changing transformations.

The problem here seems to be that by inflecting the verb for singular or plural the speaker prejudices the choice between the terms of the disjunction.

II. The noun phrases of (9):

- (9) a. One of my friends' mother
- b. All of their scarf
- c. Both of our scarf
- d. One of our scarf
- e. Both of my sisters' birthday [my sisters are twins]

which should be well-formed paraphrases of (10)

- (10) a. The mother of one of my friends
- b. The scarf that belongs to all of them
- c. The scarf that belongs to both of us
- d. The scarf of one of us
- e. The birthday of both of my sisters

are ungrammatical, regardless of verb agreement, or even of subjecthood:

- (11) *One of my friends' mother is coming.

- (12) *One of my friends' mother broke a vase.
 (13) *I had an argument with one of my friends' mother.

Since this is a left-branching construction ([[one of my friends]'s mother]], one might suppose that it is its left-branching character which makes it unacceptable. But this hypothesis fails to account for the fact that equally left-branching noun phrases with *plural* head nouns are perfectly acceptable:

- (14) One of my friends' parents are coming.

Compare also:

- (15) One of my friends' (seven) sheep have escaped.
 (16) *One of my friends' sheep has escaped.

But it is not a question of verb agreement, since (17)

- (17) One of my friends' sheep caused a commotion.
 should be ambiguous, but spontaneously has only the plural *sheep* reading.

Furthermore, for many people, mass nouns, which have singular verbs, are acceptable as heads:

- (18) One of his cats' fur is falling out.

Pluralia tantum, also with singular verb, succeed:

- (19) One of my friends' scissors is on the table.

For me, collectives do not succeed, regardless of verb inflection:

- (20) *One of my friends' team is quarrelling.
 (21) *One of my friends' team are quarrelling.

but perhaps speakers who can accept plural verbs for collective subjects will find (21) as good as (14) or (15). Some speakers find only morphologically marked plural head noun phrases acceptable, and find, for example, that (22) is better than (23):

- (22) One of my friends' kids are coming.
 (23) One of my friends' children are coming.

What is going on? Why should only (most) noun phrases which are semantically plural (and for some speakers, also morphologically plural) be permitted in this construction?

NONRESTRICTIVE DREAM
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It is occasionally argued that sentences such as (1) provide evidence that nonrestrictive relative (NR) clauses must be able to come from within the complements of certain verbs.

- (1) Teddy dreamed that his college, which was in Massachusetts, was shut down by radicals.

For Jerry Morgan has observed that the NR in (1) may