

Ungrammatical absurdities

Andrés Saab
CONICET-UBA
al_saab75@yahoo.com.ar

A well-known fact about sluicing and assertions in general is the following (Chung *et al* 1995, Romero 1998, and Merchant 2001):

- (1) #Yo besé a María, pero no sé a quién <besé>
'#I kissed Mary, but I do not know who <I kissed>.'

Introducing a weak assertion verb like *to say* saves the putative contradiction in non-elliptical contexts:

- (2) Yo digo que besé a María, pero no sé a quién besé.
'I say that I kissed Mary, but I do not know who I kissed.'

Interestingly, the elliptical version of (2) is unacceptable:

- (3) #Yo digo que besé a María, pero no sé a quién.
'#I say that I kissed Mary, but I do not know who.'

This apparent puzzle vanishes if the sluice takes as antecedent the root sentence:

- (4) #Yo digo que besé a María, pero no sé a quién digo que besé.
'#I say that I kissed Mary but I do not know who I say that I kissed.'

Thus, (3) is semantically inconsistent for the same reason that (4) is: the antecedent counts as a partial answer to the question expressed in the complement of *to know*. Assuming that being in a not knowing relation supposes that the speaker does not have any partial answer for a given question (Romero 1998), then the inconsistency in (3)/(4) follows.

But now: why can sluicing not take the embedded sentence in (2) as antecedent? Here is a reasonable answer (Jason Merchant p.c.). Let us assume that the embedded sentence in (2) has a world variable bound or restricted by the verb *decir* / *to know*. This variable cannot be traced back to the actual world but to some set of "say-worlds". In (1), instead, the world variable is free and contextually interpreted by an assignment function. Plausibly, a free world variable is just the actual world (contextually restricted). We can now understand the contrast in (2) as a contrast between a bound world variable and a free world variable. It is clear now that the elliptical site in (3) cannot take the embedded sentence as antecedent, because, then, we would get an unbound variable in the elliptical site. If this unbound variable were reinterpreted as a free variable we would obtain a failure of the parallelism condition on ellipsis, anyway. Once again, the alternative of taking the root sentence as antecedent will produce the semantic clash observed for (4).

A nice consequence of this analysis is that it predicts that Moorean-like sentences would be ungrammatical under ellipsis, and not simply absurdities, if verbs of the *believe* type may introduce bound world variables relative to the speaker world. This

is correct: (5) might be absurd, but (6) - an embedded fragment in Spanish, perfectly possible in non-Moorean contexts - is simply ungrammatical - or contradictory, at best:

- (5) Vino MARÍA, pero yo creo que vino CARLOS.
'MARÍA came, but I believe that CARLOS came.'
- (6) *Vino MARÍA, pero yo creo que CARLOS.
 came MARÍA but I believe.I that CARLOS

References

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