SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PLURAL PRONOUN CONSTRUCTION OF TLINGIT, POLISH, AND RUSSIAN

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1 Introduction: The Plural Pronoun Construction

In many languages, sentences that seem on the surface to be morpho-syntactically parallel to the English sentence in (1a) can be interpreted as true and felicitous in scenarios like (1bii), which I dub ‘inclusive scenarios’, something that is not possible for the English sentence.

(1)  a. (i) Sentence: We, with my father, went to the store.
     (ii) Judgment: True/felicitous in (1bi), not in (1bii).

b. (i) Exclusive Scenario: A group of people including myself and entities who are not my father went to the store, accompanied by my father.
     (ii) Inclusive Scenario: My father and I went to the store. Nobody else went.

Although numerous languages permit sentences like (1a) to be true in such ‘inclusive scenarios’, in this brief paper we will confine our attention to three: Polish, Russian, and Tlingit, a Na-Dene language of Alaska, British Columbia, and the Yukon.

To begin, Russian sentences like (2) have been discussed by numerous authors, though I will restrict my attention to the analysis proposed by Vassilieva & Larson (2005).

(2) My s Petej pojdem domoj (Vassilieva & Larson 2005: 101)
    we with Peter go-FUT home
    Literally, ‘We with Peter went home.’
    Judgment: Felicitous if the only people who went home were the speaker and Peter

As indicated above, sentences like (2) allow for an interpretation where the plural subject my
'we’ seems to refers to a pair consisting of just the speaker and Peter. Very similar facts also hold in Polish, as shown below.

(3) My z ojcem poszli do różnych sklepów
we with father went.1pIS to different stores
Literally, ‘We with father went to different stores’
Judgment: Felicitous if the only people who went were the speaker and their father.

Finally, as shown in (4), Tlingit sentences that seem morphosyntactically parallel to (1)-(3) also can be interpreted as true/felicitous in ‘inclusive scenarios’ like (1bii).

(4) Aχ éesh teen hoondaakahidéi wutuwa.aat.
my father with store.to PRV.1pIS.walk
Literally, ‘We walked to the store with my father’
Judgment: Felicitous if the only people who went were the speaker and their father.

To summarize, the difference between English (1a) and sentences (2)-(4) is that in (1a), the referent of the plural pronominal subject cannot include the referent of the NP complement to the P meaning with. I will henceforth refer to such an interpretation as the ‘inclusive’ interpretation (hence, the label ‘inclusive scenario’). Rather, the only interpretation possible for English (1a) is one where the subject refers to a plurality that excludes the NP complement to with, an interpretation I will refer to as the ‘exclusive’ interpretation. Unlike English, however, Russian, Polish, and Tlingit all allow for ‘inclusive’ interpretations of sentences superficially similar to English (1a). The ability for Russian (2) to receive such an interpretation has come to be known as the Plural Pronoun Construction (Vassilieva & Larson 2005). I will follow common practice in extending this label to the similar phenomena in Polish and Tlingit.

2 The Puzzle and Two Lines of Approach

The puzzle that (1)-(4) presents to us is, of course, why the sentences in (2)-(4) allow for the inclusive interpretation while English (1a) does not. In other words, what distinguishes the PPC of Tlingit, Russian, etc. from English sentences like (1a)?

A natural first possibility to consider might be that the principles which prevent English (1a) from receiving an inclusive interpretation simply don’t obtain in Russian, Polish, or Tlingit. Unfortunately, though, the infelicity of English (1a) in inclusive scenarios seems to be a straightforward consequence of Principle C. As shown in (5) below, in order to interpret (1a) as true in scenarios like (1bii), we would need for the referent of a pronoun (we) to include the referent of an R-expression (my father) that it c-commands, a situation excluded by Principle C.

(5) Inclusive Interpretation of English (1a) Violates Principle C
We_{i,j} with [my father] went to the store.

Curiously, while it seems that Principle C would rule out an inclusive interpretation of (1)-(4), Polish, Russian, and Tlingit nevertheless all obey Principle C. The fact that Tlingit observes Principle C can be shown by facts like the following.
(6) **Principle C in Tlingit**

a. \( \text{pro} \) [ Bill tláa ] asixán.
   \( \text{pro} \) Bill mother 3O.3sgS.IMPRV.love

   *He loves Bill’s mother.*

   **Judgment:**
   The person loving Bill’s mother cannot be Bill himself, but somebody else

b. Ax éesh t’akká hoondaakahididei wutuwa.aat.
   my father beside store.towards PRV.1plS.walk

   *Literally, ‘We walked to the store next to my father’*

   **Judgment:**
   Felicitous only in exclusive scenario (1bi), *not* in inclusive scenario (1bii)

Note in particular that sentence (6b) seems on the surface to be structurally identical to (4); it differs only in the identity of the head of the PP. Nevertheless, (6b) disallows an inclusive interpretation, as would be predicted by the activity of Principle C in Tlingit. This fact also shows that the possibility of the inclusive interpretation depends crucially on the identity of the preposition heading the PP modifier; in all languages with a Plural Pronoun Construction (PPC), the P head in the construction must be one translatable as *with*.

The activity of Principle C in Tlingit, Russian, and Polish furthermore demonstrate that the sentences in (2)-(4) could *not* have the structure in (5). Consequently, their ability to receive an inclusive interpretation must be due to their allowing a structural analysis that English (1a) does not. In the literature on the PPC, there are two prominent approaches to the non-English parse that sentences like (2)-(4) allow. The first was proposed by Hale (2015) for the PPC of Navajo. As shown below, a Navajo PPC is quite similar in form to those in the related language Tlingit.

(7) Ashiiké bił ndaashnish.
   boy with PL.1S.work

   *Literally ‘We with the boy are working’*

   **Judgment:**
   Felicitous in inclusive scenario, where the only ones working are the speaker and the boy

Hale proposes that Navajo PPCs like (7) are syntactically derived from conjunction structures like (8).

(8) [ shí dóó ashiiké ] ndaashnish.
   I and boy PL.1S.work

   *Literally ‘The boy and I are working’*

Of course, a direct syntactic derivation of (7) from (8) necessarily relies upon rather complex structural transformations, ones that are nowadays assumed to be ruled out by UG. Nevertheless, one can perhaps discern in Hale’s original proposal the following key insight, one that could certainly transcend the particular transformational approach he designed.
In a PPC construction, the subject is at some abstract level interpreted as a conjunction, one of whose conjuncts is the NP complement to the preposition meaning with.

A very different approach to PPC is pursued by Vassileva & Larson (2005), who propose that the structure of Russian (2) is akin to that in (10), where the PP s Petej ‘with Peter’ is complement to the plural pronoun my ‘we’.

Vassileva & Larson combine this syntax with the following semantics for the plural pronoun subject.

Under this semantics, the denotation of my ‘we’ is relative to a context C, and takes as argument some entity x, returning the plurality consisting of x and the speaker in context C. Thus, in the structure in (10), the denotation of my would take as argument the entity Peter and return the plurality denoted consisting of Peter and the speaker in the context. Consequently, sentence (10) could be construed as true in an inclusive scenario where only Peter and the speaker went home, resulting in an inclusive interpretation for (2). As with Hale’s (2015) analysis, one can discern a general insight behind Vassileva & Larson’s approach, one that could be shared with various different specific implementations. This general perspective is summarized as follows.

That is, under the ‘PPC as Abstract Conjunction’ approach (9), the preposition translatable as with is structurally derived from – or exceptionally interpreted as – a conjunction, and is not imbued with its usual ‘comitative’ meaning. Similarly, under the ‘PPC as Pronoun Complementation’ approach (12), the PP complement of the plural pronoun is simply interpreted as its NP complement; the P-head itself is ignored for the purposes of interpreting the structure in (10). Consequently, under both approaches, the truth-conditions of the PPC structures in (2)-(4) are in no way different from those of the simple, non-PPC sentences in (14).
Some Observations on the PPC of Tlingit, Polish, and Russian

(14) a. Russian My pojdem domoj
    we go-FUT home
    *We went home.*

b. Polish My poszli do różnych sklepów
    we went.1plS to different stores
    *We went to different stores*

c. Tlingit Hoondaakahidéi wutuwa.aat.
    store.to PRV.1plS.walk
    *We walked to the store*

In the following section, however, we will see that certain facts from these three languages challenge this shared assumption in (13).

3 The PPC and ‘Sentence-Internal’ Readings of Different

If the PPC sentences in (2)-(4) truly are no different in their truth-conditions from the sentences in (14), then we predict that they should allow for a variety of so-called ‘sentence internal’ readings of different. That is, like the putatively parallel English sentences in (15a,b), PPC sentences should be true and felicitous in both the scenarios in (15c).

(15) ‘Sentence-Internal’ Readings of Different in English

a. Conjunction Subject: My father and I went to different stores

b. Plural Pronoun Subject: We went to different stores.

c. (i) Different Stores for Each Entity (DSEn)
    I went to Big Y. My father went to Stop and Shop.

(ii) Different Stores for Each Event (DSEv)
    My father and I together went to Big Y. Then, we went to Stop and Shop. Then we went to Whole Foods.

Curiously, however, the Tlingit sentence in (16a) is only felicitous in scenario (15cii), the ‘Different Stores for Each Event’ (DSEv) scenario; it’s infelicitous in scenario (15ci), the ‘Different Stores for Each Entity’ (DSEn) scenario.

(16) ‘Sentence-Internal’ Readings of Goot ‘Different’ with Tlingit PPCs

a. Ax éexh teen ch’a goot aa hoondaakahididei wutuwa.aat.
    my father with just different of stores.towards PRV.1plS.walk
    Literally ‘We walked to different stores with my father’.
b. Judgment (of Four Speakers):
   Felicitous only in DSEv scenario (15cii); Not felicitous in DSEn scenario (15ci)

This pattern of judgments is markedly different from those for sentences containing a conjoined subject, like that in (17).

(17)  ‘Sentence-Internal’ Readings of Goot ‘Different’ with Tlingit Conjunctions

a. Ax éexh ka xát ch’a goot aa hoondaakahididei wutuwa.aat.
   my father and I just different of stores.towards PRV.1plS.walk
   My father and I walked to different stores.

b. Judgment (of Four Speakers):
   Felicitous in both DSEv and DSEn scenarios in (15c).

It seems, then, that a PPC construction in Tlingit – where the pronominal subject receives an inclusive interpretation – is incompatible with a sentence-internal reading of goot ‘different’ that distributes over the plural subject. This is unexpected if the PCC construction is semantically no different from either a sentence with a conjoined subject (17a) or one with a plain pronominal subject, like English (15b). Consequently, the contrast between (16) and (17) in Tlingit offers an interesting challenge to the general assumption in (13) that all these structures are semantically equivalent.

What, though, of the PPCs of Russian and Polish? Although all four Tlingit language consultants noted a contrast between (16) and (17), there was greater variety in judgments amongst speakers of Russian and Polish. Amongst Russian speakers, the PPC sentence in (18a) was felt by 2/5 speakers to be felicitous only in the DSEv scenario in (15cii), and not in the DSEv scenario in (15ci). However, 3/5 of the Russian speakers consulted perceived no contrast in acceptability between these two scenarios. All speakers agreed that the conjunction sentence in (18b) and the plain pronominal subject sentence in (18c) are equally acceptable in both scenarios.

(18)  ‘Sentence-Internal’ Readings of Raznye ‘Different’ in Russian

a. Plural Pronoun Construction
   My s otcom poexali v raznye magaziny
   we with father went.PL to different stores
   Literally ‘We with father went to different stores’
   Judgment:
   2/5: only acceptable in (15cii); 3/5: acceptable in both scenarios in (15c)

b. Conjunction Structure:
   Ja i moj otec poexali v raznye magaziny
   I and my father went.PL to different stores
   My father and I went to different stores.
   Judgment: 5/5: acceptable in both scenarios in (15c)
c. **Plain Pronominal Subject**

My poexali v raznye magaziny
we went.PL to different stores
*We went to different stores.*

*Judgment:* 5/5: acceptable in both scenarios in (15c)

Similar variety was found for Polish as well. As shown below, 2/3 speakers felt that the PPC sentence in (19a) was only felicitous in the DSEv scenario (15ci); however, one speaker reported no contrast in acceptability for (19a) across the two scenarios. Again, all three speakers agreed that the conjunction sentence in (19b) and the plain pronominal sentence in (19c) were acceptable in both the scenarios in (15c).

(19) **‘Sentence-Internal’ Readings of Różnych ‘Different’ in Polish**

a. **Plural Pronoun Construction**

My z ojcem poszli do różnych sklepów
we with father went.1plS to different stores
Literally, ‘*We with father went to different stores*’

*Judgment:* 2/3: only acceptable in (15cii); 1/3: acceptable in both scenarios in (15c)

b. **Conjunction Structure:**

Ja i ojcem poszli do różnych sklepów
I and father went.1plS to different stores
*Father and I went to different stores.*

*Judgment:* 3/3: acceptable in both scenarios in (15c)

c. **Plain Pronominal Subject**

My poszli do różnych sklepów
we went.1plS to different stores
*We went to different stores*

*Judgment:* 3/3: acceptable in both scenarios in (15c)

We find, then, that for both Russian and Polish, some speakers report Tlingit-like judgments regarding the PPC. That is, for these speakers, PPC sentences differ from both conjunction sentences and plain pronominal sentences in terms of what kinds of sentence internal readings are allowable for *different*. Again, these facts challenge the key semantic assumption regarding the PPC in (13), and thus the analyses in (9) and (12) that rest upon that assumption.

4 **A Speculative Proposal and Some Informal Observations**

The facts in (16)-(19) raise the obvious question of what could possibly account for the inability for PPC sentences to be interpreted as true/felicitous in ‘DSEn’ scenarios like (15ci). It clearly cannot be due to a general incompatibility with a ‘sentence-internal’ reading of *different*. After
all, the ‘DSEv’ reading in (15cii) is also a species of ‘sentence internal’ reading for different. I would, however, like to offer the following tentative speculation.

(20) **Interpretation of With in the PPC**
Contrary to the assumption in (13), in a PPC construction, the preposition meaning with is semantically interpreted, and its meaning entails that the complement of the P and the referent of the pronoun stay in close proximity.

That is, for example, in a PPC sentence like Tlingit (16a), the preposition teen ‘with’ does make a semantic contribution to the sentence, and results in the entailment that the speaker and their father are spatially contiguous. Such spatial contiguity would be incompatible with the ‘DSEn’ scenario in (15ci), but would be entirely consistent with the ‘DSEv’ scenario in (15cii). A similar explanation could be offered for the rejection – by some speakers – of the PPC sentences of Russian and Polish in the ‘DSEn’ scenarios.

It seems, then, that we should seek to develop an analysis of the PPC where the ‘comitative’ preposition appearing in the construction is indeed semantically interpreted, and yields the contiguity entailment described in (20). What, though, could such an account look like? One very speculative possibility is suggested by the English facts in (21).

(21) **‘Sentence-Internal’ Readings of Different with English Appositive**

a. Sentence: We, I with my father, went to different stores.
b. Judgment: 7/7: only acceptable in (15cii); not acceptable in (15ci)

In sentence (21), the plural subject we is modified by the appositive I with my father. Seven English speakers – including myself – report that this sentence is only true/felicitous in the ‘DSEv’ scenario (15cii). It cannot be interpreted as true in the ‘DSEn’ scenario in (15ci). The reason for this could very well be the one offered in (20). That is, in the appositive I with my father, the preposition with is interpreted, and contributes the information that the speaker and their father maintained spatial proximity. Consequently, this sentence would be incompatible with the ‘DSEn’ scenario (15ci), but not with the ‘DSEv’ scenario (15ii).

With this in mind, it’s worth noting the striking surface similarity between the English sentence in (21a) and the PPCs in (2)-(4). This similarity suggests the proposal in (22) below.

(22) **The PPC as an Elliptical Appositive**
In the PPC construction, the overtly pronounced PP is elliptical for an appositive of the form [NP₁ with NP₂], where the plural pronoun in the PPC denotes the sum of [[NP₁]] and [[NP₂]].

To illustrate, the proposal in (22) would assign the PPCs in (2)-(4) the following structures.

(23) a. Structure of Russian (2)
My [ <ja> s Petej ] pojdem domoj
we I with Peter go-FUT home
*We, I with Peter, went home.*
b. Structure of Polish (3)

My [ <ja> z ojcem ] poszliśmy do różnych sklepów
we I with father went.1plS to different stores

We, I with father, went to different stores.

c. Structure of Tlingit (4)

pro1pl [ <χát> aχ éesh teen ] hoondaakahidéí wutuwa.aat.
we I my father with store.to PRV.1plS.walk

We, I with my father, went to the store.

Clearly, under the analysis in (22)-(23), the preposition appearing in the PPC is interpreted, and so the proposal in (20) could be employed to predict the facts in (16)-(19). Furthermore, the absence of the PPC from English could be attributed simply to the absence of the kind of ellipsis at work in (23). Somewhat differently, we might suppose that the structures in (23) don’t exhibit ellipsis per se, but instead there is some special interpretation of the P that allows for the PP to receive a meaning akin to the appositives indicated in (23) and (21). Either way, such an approach could account for the absence of an ‘inclusive’ interpretation for Tlingit (6b), by restricting the ellipsis process (or special interpretation) to the P teen ‘with’.

Of course, to develop this speculative proposal into a serious hypothesis, we need to better understand the grammar of the English sentence in (21a). We’d also need an explanation for why not all speakers of Russian and Polish reject the PPC with the ‘DSEn’ scenario in (15ci). Nevertheless, there are two additional facts that this proposal could account for. First, it could potentially explain the following contrast in Russian, reported by Vassilieva & Larson (2005).

we with Peter danced.PL Peter with us danced.PL

Literally ‘We with Peter danced.’

Judgment: Allows for inclusive interpretation.

That is, if the order of the pronoun and the NP in the PPC is reversed, the resulting sentence is ill-formed. Our proposal in (22)-(23) straightforwardly predicts this. Note that under a PPC parse, the sentence in (24b) would receive the structure in (25).

Peter him with us danced.PL

Under this syntax, the subject of the sentence is singular Petja, and so – just as in Vassilieva & Larson’s analysis – we predict the ill-formedness of (24b) as the result of an ‘agreement clash’ with the plural-marked verb. Secondly, our account could also explain the superficially similar fact in (26).

we with her danced.PL they with me danced.PL

Literally ‘We with her danced’

Judgment: Sentence (26a), but not (26b), allows an inclusive interpretation where the speaker is dancing with one other individual.
Under our proposal, the inability to give a PPC-like interpretation for (26b) would be due to the same factors that cause the following appositive structure in English to be ill-formed.

(27)   * They, him with me, danced.

The ill-formedness of (27) seems to be due to ‘Maximize Presupposition’ (Sauerland 2004). That is, in the appositive construction in (21a), the referent of the plural pronoun must be equal to the sum of the two NPs in the appositive. In sentence (27), this would mean that the referent of the plural pronoun they includes the speaker. Consequently, Maximize Presupposition would require that such a plurality be referred to with a first person pronoun, rather than a third person pronoun (Singh 2011). Under our speculative proposals in (22)-(23), exactly this same explanation could be extended to the Russian facts in (26).

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References


