A non-existential analysis for the German impersonal pronoun ‘man’ in episodic sentences

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1. The phenomenon: German ‘man’ in episodic sentences

- **German ‘man’** is a dedicated impersonal pronoun: like English *one*, it can occur in generic sentences describing “people in general”:
  1. Man muss sich die Zähne putzen.
  2. One has to brush one’s teeth.

- Dedicated impersonal pronouns: generally restricted to talk about humans, unspecified for number
  1. The brushing in (1) and the calling in (2) is done by one or more humans (see Cabredo Hoffner 2015, Fenger 2018)

- **German ‘man’**: only nominative; suppletive forms in the accusative (i.e., *einen*) and dative (i.e., *einem*)
  1. suppletive forms do not occur in the existential use (see discussion in Kratzer 1997)

2. ‘Man’ as an existential quantifier?

- **Proposal**: In episodic sentences, man denotes an existential quantifier over humans (∃ human(x) ∧ P(x))
  1. (3) max \( = \lambda x . \exists y . [ \text{human}(x) \land P(y)] \)

- **Problem**: man does not scopally interact as expected with other quantifiers or negation:
  1. it only has low scope (see Zifonun 2000)
  2. (4) Man hat mich dreimal angerufen.
  4. ‘Someone called me three times.’

- **Proposal**: The “referent” of man cannot be picked up by a pronoun in the next sentence – unlike for the event
  1. (5) Man hat bei uns nicht eingebrochen.
  2. Jemand hat bei uns nicht eingebrochen.
  3. ‘Someone didn’t break in at our place.’

- **Problem**: ‘The referent of man cannot be picked up by a pronoun’
  1. (6) Man hat für dich angerufen.
  2. ‘IMP called for you.’ (Fenger 2018:297)

- **Upshot**: Man in episodic sentences does not behave like a simple existential quantifier.

3. ‘Man’ as an existentially closed variable?

- **Proposal**: man contributes an individual variable \( x \) that is bound by existential event closure
  1. \( x \) contributes the obligatory low scope (see e.g., Malamud 2012)
  2. (7) max \( = \forall x . \exists y . [ \text{human}(x) \land P(y)] \)
  3. (8) Gestern hat sich gegenseitig gedeckt.

- **Problem**: the value of \( max \) depends only on \( P \) and \( e \):
  1. can only be bound by information about the inferred individual
  2. \( max \) is compatible with additional inferences

- **Upshot**: Any existential force attributed to man must not introduce anaphorically accessible individuals.

4. ‘Man’ as a contextually interpreted free individual variable?

- **Proposal**: man contributes an individual variable \( x \) that is interpreted arbitrarily via the variable assignment \( g \)
  1. (9) Man hat für dich angerufen.
  2. ‘IMP called for you.’

- **Problem**: unlike type-e-expressions, man cannot associate with ‘als’-phrases (Kratzer 1997, Zobel 2018)

- **Upshot**: A context-based analysis must not use the same components as a type-e-variable analysis for pronouns.

5. Proposal: “existential” ‘man’ as an operator

- **Proposal**: man is an operator (type \( \langle \text{evt}, \text{vt} \rangle \)) that fills the highest argument slot of a one-place predicate \( P \) with the maximal individual that participates in the event \( e \) in the role belonging to the slot
  1. (11) \[ \text{man}(e) = \lambda x . \exists y . [ \text{human}(x) \land P(y)](e) \]

- **Maximal individual**: man is compatible with a semantically plural subject, (13)
  1. (13) Man hat sich gegenseitig gedeckt.
  2. (14) Gestern hat man mit Streichhölzern die Uni angezündet.

6. Properties of **max** …

- **Value of \( max \) depends on \( P \) and \( e \):**
  1. (15) Gestern verliefen wir uns in der Innenstadt.
  2. ‘Yesterday, we went into the city.’

7. “Existential” vs. generic ‘man’

- **Variable-based analysis** in (6) provides a unified way to capture man in generic sentences
  1. (16) Gen x [ has-to-brush-teeth(x) ]

- **Operator-based analysis** in (11) contains no bindable variable for Gen
  1. (17) *Keiner behauptet, dass man die Uni angezündet hat.

8. Summary: the proposal in brief

- **German ‘man’ is polysemous**: it contributes a variable in its generic use and an operator in its “existential” use.
- **The “existential use”**: the highest verbal argument is set as the maximal individual involved in the event described by the predicate in the relevant role; no variable or existential quantifier is involved in the interpretation.
- **Proposals for the individual**: suggestions for the individual is its participation, the interpretation intuitively corresponds to “someone”.

References