

(Some) Essentially Plural Predicates are Singular: Evidence from Group Nouns

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This paper aims at explaining an old puzzle: while group nouns exhibit the plural behavior:

(1) a. The family has gathered in the hallway. (collective predication)

b. The basketball team is tall. (distributive predication)

they do not occur with some nominal and adjectival collective predicates, those which constitute the class of essentially plural predicates together with the verb in (1a) (Winter '02):

(2) a. *The committee is friends. cf. The committee members are friends.

b. *The committee is similar. cf. The committee members are similar.

The account is made up of two ingredients. The first is the observation that distributive predication with group nouns is limited to lexical distributivity (Kratzer '07, de Vries '13):

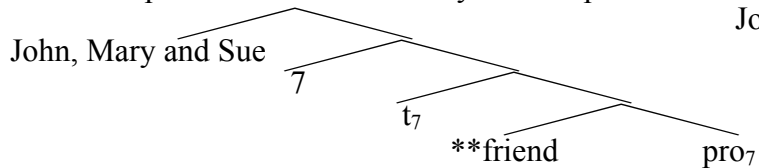
(3) a. The class is hiding somewhere. (can only mean: the children are all hiding in the same spot)

b. The Jones family is blond or red-haired. (all the Jones need to have the same hair color)

The second ingredient is Matushansky and Ionin's ('11) singular analysis of plural relational nouns such as *sisters*. I argue that by recasting M&I's analysis in terms of phrasal distributivity and extending it to adjectival essentially plural predicates, the incompatibility in question is reduced to the inability of group nouns to yield phrasal distributivity. Put differently, the proposal is that nominal and adjectival essentially plural predicates are instances of phrasal distributive predication rather than collective predication, which is why they cannot occur with group nouns.

Analyses of essentially plural predicates: Hackl ('02) proposes deriving the reciprocal interpretation of plural relational nouns by the ** operator of Krifka ('86).

(4) John, Mary and Sue are friends.



The ** operator introduces cumulativity between the two arguments, deriving weak reciprocal interpretation. A problem noted in the literature is that plural relational nouns tend to have strong reciprocal interpretation. In (4), each of John, Mary and Sue has to be a friend of every other. Similarly, cumulativity can be generalized infinitely. If there is a neighborhood chain, all the inhabitants of some city are predicted to be *neighbors* (Eschenbach '93). The central concern of M&I comes from the interaction of plural relational nouns with cardinals as in *three sisters*. I&M ('06) claim that cardinals combine with NPs that denote atomic sets, yet the relational predicate is semantically plural in Hackl's and Eschenbach's analyses. M&I proposes to derive strong reciprocity by a distributivity operator. While they implement this idea by a distributivity operator for an internal argument slot in combination with a reflexivizing operator, I suggest that a simpler implementation can be obtained by adopting Beck's ('01) analysis of strong reciprocity in terms of the D operator.

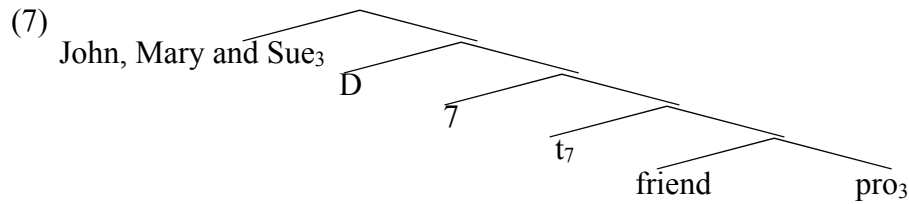
(5) a. John, Mary and Sue talked to each other.

b. $[j \oplus m \oplus s]_z [D [\lambda y. y \text{ talked to } \sigma x (x \leq z_{\text{range}} \wedge \neg x \circ y_{\text{contrast}})]]$ c. $(\forall x, y \leq \text{Atom } j \oplus m \oplus s) (\text{talk}(x, y))$

(6) $[[D]] = \lambda P_{\text{et}} \lambda x \forall y [y \leq \text{Atom } x \rightarrow P(y)]$

Beck treats *each other* as a plural definite with two variables, the range argument and the contrast argument, denoting the maximal individual which is part of z_{range} and does not overlap with y_{contrast} . In combination with the D operator, strong reciprocity is derived.

I propose that strong reciprocity with plural relational nouns can be derived similarly, by minimally modifying Hackl's structure:



(*λyλs[*ext(y)(s)&*friend(s)&*int(j⊕m⊕s)(s)](j⊕m⊕s))

Departing from the previous literature, I take relational nouns to be predicates over states. The phrasal predicate is pluralized by the D operator. At first sight, this structure, owing to the lack of the contrast argument, seems to yield too strong an interpretation. I follow M&I's insight that due to the irreflexivity presupposition associated with the relational noun source, the atomic reflexive is automatically excluded from consideration. I further propose that this analysis extends to those essentially plural adjectival predicates that have a relational adjective source (viz. *similar* and *different*). The parallel between *similar/different* and reciprocals has long been noted. (Moltmann '92, Beck '00).

Group nouns and lexical/phrasal distributivity: I follow the literature in distinguishing between lexical and phrasal distributivity (Winter '01, Kratzer '07, Champollion '10). Lexical distributivity (*The girls smiled*) corresponds to cases where distributivity can be derived from properties of the lexical item involved. *Smile* can be assumed to apply both to events whose agents are atomic individuals and to events whose agents are the sums of these individuals (lexical cumulativity). Phrasal distributivity (*The girls are wearing a dress*) cannot be derived in this way since lexical cumulativity only concerns the predicate and does not apply to the phrase level. To derive phrasal distributivity, insertion of a covert distributivity operator (viz. D) is required. As noted above, group nouns allow lexical distributivity but not phrasal distributivity.

The puzzle resolved: By analyzing the nominal and adjectival essentially plural predicates as singular requiring insertion of the D operator, their incompatibility with group nouns is immediately explained because group nouns do not allow phrasal distributivity (i.e. insertion of the D operator). Support for the analysis comes from British English. BE is known to allow plural agreement with group nouns. De Vries ('13) observes that with plural agreement, group nouns allow phrasal distributivity:

(8) a. The class are hiding somewhere.

(can mean: each of the children is hiding in a different place)

b. The Jones family are very short or very tall.

(compatible with: some of the Jones are very short while the others are very tall)

This leads to the prediction that with plural agreement, nominal and adjectival essentially collective predicates should be able to occur with group nouns. This is borne out:

(9) a. The team are friends on track as well as off track, and are much family as we are friends. (de Vries 2013:246)

b. The committee are (all) very similar/different.

Another piece of supporting evidence comes from partitives. In support of the plural denotation for group nouns, Pearson ('11) notes that partitives containing group nouns license plural agreement in all dialects of English: (10) Half of the family are doctors.

We observe that partitives also allow phrasal distributivity:

(11) Half of the committee are hiding somewhere/are very short or very tall.

As expected, nominal and adjectival essentially collective predicates are fine:

(12) Half of the committee are friends/similar.

(The talk will include a discussion on de Vries' treatment of group nouns, where it is argued that sentences like *The committee is writing plays* show that singular-agreeing group nouns denote a plurality, contra her analysis.)