On the Alleged Definiteness of Possessives
Stanley Peters and Dag Westerståhl

Possessives are almost universally thought to be quite generally definite (Abbott 2004). This view holds such powerful sway that semanticists like Keenan and Stavi have sought (1986) to explain away the apparent indefiniteness of cases like (1) a. seven professors’ manuscripts b. some of most teachers’ pupils c. many books of Peter’s which, unlike definite NPs, are acceptable as the coda of existential there sentences. Partee and Borschev (2003) accept that such NPs are indefinite but hold they somehow contain a hidden definite.

Why such widespread rejection of the prima facie indefiniteness of some possessives? We suggest this stems from a combination of influences, the most interesting of which is a property that possessives genuinely have, which has been confounded with definiteness but which we show can be clearly distinguished from it. Other influences seem to include disregard of considerations like differences between syntactic and semantic definiteness, as well as failure to sample a representative range of possessives.

All possessives actually do carry possessive existential import: the implication that some entities in the extension of the possessed noun are in fact possessed by individuals identified in the possessor phrase. This is so even when the quantifier over possessed entities does not itself have existential import. Although (2) a. At most one American nobleman lives in New York. b. No unicorn is red.
do not entail that there are American noblemen or unicorns, the sentences (3) a. At most one of Mary's sisters lives in New York. b. None of three students have Porsches. The possessive construction adds existential import to the quantification over possessed entities in (3a,b), as it always does to any quantifier over possessed entities that lacks existential import.1

Because of possessive existential import, any sentence containing a possessive, with whatever quantifier over possessed entities, can be paraphrased in a way that appears to contain an internal definite:

(4) a. For $x = \text{Mary}$, at most one of the sisters of $x$ lives in New York.
   b. For three students $x$, none of the Porsches of $x$ is red.
This is possible precisely because all possessives carry possessive existential import. However, exactly same meaning is paraphrased by:

(5) a. For $x = \text{Mary}$, $x$ has a sister and at most one sister that $x$ has lives in New York.
   b. For three students $x$, $x$ has a Porsche and no Porsche that $x$ has is red.
which contain no internal definite (semantic or syntactic)! Thus, the claim that possessives contain an internal definite is not empirically testable; it makes no empirical predictions whatsoever beyond those that follow from the fact that possessives have existential import.

We will show that none of these conclusions is disturbed by scrupulously distinguishing semantic definiteness from syntactic definiteness, and discuss the prevailing limitation in the literature on possessives to considering a narrow range of syntactically definite examples. Thus, we argue that some possessives are semantically as well as syntactically definite, some are syntactically but not semantically definite, and others are neither syntactically nor semantically definite, e.g. (1a-c). We further show that the Partitive Constraint (Jackendoff 1977) does not correctly diagnose for definiteness.

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1 Without that addition (3b) would mean what “All but three students have red Porsches” does, and (3a) could be paraphrased: If Mary has any sisters at all, no more than one of them lives in New York.
References


