Modal arguments of preference predicates as an exception to Percus' Generalization X

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Introduction: Percus Generalization X. Percus (2000) famously formulates two binding conditions for situation pronouns. This talk addresses the first of these two conditions:

(1)   **Generalization X:** The situation pronoun that a verb selects for must be coindexed with the nearest λ above it.

At the end of his paper, Percus reformulates this generalization against the background of the assumption of moving relative world-pronouns:

(2)   "On this way of looking at things, to say that the structures [. . .] obey Generalization X is to say that the relative pronoun whose movement makes the VP into a proposition must move from the situation position in the structure the verb projects. It cannot move, say, from the situation position inside the DP." (Percus, 2000, p. 228)

In this paper, I argue that there is an exception to this generalization: The exception is the case where the DP *is identical* with the relative pronoun. The relevant examples are modal arguments of preference comparatives as in (3) illustrated for German:

(3)   Es ist besser, wenn du   gehst.
        It is better if   you go
        'It is better, if you go'

The motivation Lassiter (2011) sketches a semantics for sentences of this kind. But he doesn't give an explicit compositional semantics. My claim here is that the assumption that the DP is a relative world pronoun is the only non-standard assumption we have to make to otherwise get a straight-forward compositional semantics for these constructions that can be conservative about the semantics of the comparative morpholgy and the semantic contribution of the conditional. To show this I will give a detailed semantics for the adjective *gut* ('good') that restates a classical Kratzer-style modal semantics with degrees. The basic assumption for this will be that degrees of goodness are equivalence classes of possible worlds that are equally "good" relative to a given conversational background. This is in the spirit of Cresswell (1976) and similar to Lassiter (2011).

(4) $[\![\mathbf{gut}_{(s(st)t)dsst}]\!]^g = \lambda f.\ \lambda d.\ \lambda w'.\ \lambda w.\ \mathrm{GOOD}_{w,f}(w') \geqslant_{f(w)} d$

(5) $\mathrm{GOOD}_{w,g}(w') = [w']_{g(w)}$, where $[w']_{g(w)} \in \mathrm{Deg}_{g(w)}$ ($\mathrm{Deg}_{g(w)}$ = the set of equivalence classes with respect to the conversational background g: $\{[w']_{g(w)} \mid w' \in \mathcal{F}(>_{g(w)})\}$)

This restatement of the semantics with degrees allows us to make use of existing theories of comparatives, see Heim (2001), von Stechow (2012) amongst others, to account for the comparative morphology in a compositional way.

The semantics for the conditional clauses can also stay classical: I assume a slight modification of the version in Heim (1992):

(6) $[\ \lambda_1\ [\ w_1\ [[[_{(st)(st)st}\ \square\ R_2\ ]\ [_{st}\ \mathbf{if}\ \varphi\ ]]\ [_{st}\ \psi\ ]]]]$

(7) $[\![\square]\!]^g = \lambda R.\ \lambda p.\ \lambda q.\ \lambda w.\ (\forall w')[[R(w)(w') \wedge \mathbf{Sim}(p)(w)(w')] \rightarrow q(w')]$

The most straight-forward way to combine these two theory-parts is to assume that the DP *es* is a relative pronoun of worlds. The core semantics is the following (the free degree pronoun d_2 is a simplification for expositional reasons; its the semantic argument-position of either the POS-operator or the comparative clause):

(8) $\quad\llbracket\ [\ \lambda_1\ [\ w_1\ [[\ \lambda_2\ [\ w_1\ \mathbf{ES}_2\ d_2\ \mathbf{gut}\ f_3\ \mathbf{ist}\ ]]\ [\ \Box\ R_4\ \mathbf{wenn}\ \varphi\ ]]]]\ \rrbracket^g\ =$
$$\lambda w.\ (\forall w')[g(4)(w)(w') \wedge \mathbf{Sim}(\llbracket\varphi\rrbracket^g)(w)(w') \to \mathrm{GOOD}_{g(3),w}(w') \geqslant_{g(3)(w)} g(2)$$

The assumption that the *es*-DP in subject-position has to be a relative world-pronoun for type reasons motivates to add the exception to Percus Generalization X.

Additional evidence. Additional evidence comes from the licensing of subjunctive morphology in the root clause. The picture we find for German is that there is a strong preference for "mood-matching" (similar as for the antecendens and consequens of conditionals), i.e., we find indicative/subjunctive in the matrix when we find indicative/subjunctive in the *wenn*-clause.

(9)   a.   Es ist   besser, wenn du {gehst / *gingest}.
            It be.IND better if   you {go.IND / go.SUBJ}
            'It is better, if you go'
       b.   Es wäre   besser, wenn du {?gehst / gingest}.
            It be.SUBJ better if   you {go.IND / go.SUBJ}
            'It would be better, if you go'

According to the semantics given above, we don't have a conditionalized assessment of goodness, but an actual assessment of the goodness of certain conditions. This is as it should be: (9-b), for example, doesn't mean that under different circumstances I would prefer that you leave but that I *here and now* prefer certain conditions to hold. This means: The conditional is not used as a sentential modal operator but like a quantifier in subject position of a preference predicate. Since we have a non-standard use of the modal, we don't get the standard licensing conditions for matrix mood between the modal and the verb. How then is the morphology licensed? The new hypothesis that the DP *es* is a relative world-pronoun allows us to explain the licensing of matrix mood as a case of subject-verb-agreement. The idea is that *es* besides its nominal features inherits the mood feature of the conditional clause and licenses the verbal mood of the matrix verb via subject-verb-agreement. Similar claims have been made for the temporal domain, see Pesetsky & Torrego (2004).

Application to *that* clauses. To further illustrate the plausibility of the claim, I compare the conditions of use of *wenn*- ('if') and *dass*- ('that') clauses in these constructions and show that, first, the conditions of use match the discribed conditions of use for conditionals in Kratzer (1978) and for volitive attitudes in Heim (1992) that share the core ingridients of this proposal. Second, I show that the conditions of use are predicted on this account under the assumption of von Fintel (1997)'s semantics for the subjunctive in conditionals and the assumption that the factive *that*-clauses denote facts as proposed by Kratzer (2006). It is also predicted that *dass*-clauses cannot be used in combination with the subjunctive (10).

(10)   Es wäre   besser, {wenn / *dass} du gingest.
        It be.SUBJ better {if   / that} you go.SUBJ

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