Grammaticality and Meaning Shift

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It has been argued that some sentences are felt ungrammatical because they are analytic (e.g. "There is every philosopher in the garden" cf. Barwise and Cooper 1981). Similar explanations have been give to other constructions, cf. Chierchia 1984, 2004, 2006, von Fintel 1993, Gajewski 2002, Fox and Hackl 2007, Abrusán 2007/2014. . . However, in many cases analytic sentences are acceptable or merely semantically anomalous (e.g. "Every woman is a woman"). How should we explain this difference?

Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990) and Kamp and Partee (1995) proposed that ungrammaticality does not arise when the meaning of predicates in analytical sentences is restricted by meaning shift. I will elaborate on this proposal using methods from Distributional Semantics.

Distributional Semantics is a computational approach to semantics designed to capture the meaning of words based on their distributions in context. It sheds new light on the nature of meaning shift during semantic composition that is also at work in the case of the interpretation of grammatical analytical sentences. I discuss preliminary results of joint work with N. Asher and T. van de Cruys that show that the same computational method that captures meaning shifts of lexical predicates (in particular, adjectives and nouns) does not show relevant types of meaning shifts with logical vocabulary (in particular, determiners). This suggests that analytical sentences whose analyticity depends on the logical vocabulary will not be reinterpretable by meaning shift and should be ungrammatical.

In sum, I argue that Distributional Semantics leads to a better understanding of what aspects of lexical meaning can or cannot shift in context. These results support a two-tier view of lexical meaning, as proposed in Asher (2011), according to which lexical items have both an internal and an external meaning. Our results suggest that meaning shift can only affect internal meaning.