Do Free Relative Clauses Have Quantificational Force?

Wolfgang Sternefeld (Tübingen)

Consider the German Free Relative Clauses (FRC) in (1):

(1)   Wer nimmt, was ihm   nicht gehört, ist ein Dieb
        Who takes   what to-him not   belongs is a   thief

The meaning of (1) can clearly be paraphrased as (2), so that the subject FRC gets a universal (or generic) meaning:

(2)   Jeder, der (everyone who) nimmt, was ihm nicht gehört, ist ein Dieb

But now, the meaning of the embedded object FRC in both (1) and (2) can be paraphrased as in (3):

(3)   Jeder,   der etwas   nimmt, das ihm   nicht gehört, ist ein Dieb
        Everyone who something takes   that to-him not   belongs is a   thief
        'Everyone who takes anything that does not belong to him is a thief'

The point I want to make is that, given the meaning of *thief*, the embedded FRC can (and must) be semantically interpreted as an indefinite existential quantification with a free choice reading. It is not the case that only those who steal *everything* that does not belong to them are judged to be thieves.

Consulting the literature on the subject, this comes as a surprise. The standard analysis seems to be that FRCs either have a universal (sometimes) generic reading, or a definite reading (cf. e.g. Wilder (1998), Jacobson (1995), or Grosu (2003)); the existential reading FRCs exhibit has hitherto gone largely unnoticed. As was kindly pointed out to me by Ralf Vogel, there is the exception of Wiltschko (1999). However, her examples of indefiniteness allow for reinterpretations that make them less straightforward than (1). To exemplify, Wiltschko argues that, given that the set of subjects studied by a student may vary from student to student, the FRC in (4) cannot have a definite reading.

(4)   every student studies what(ever) (subject) is useful for society

However, this indefiniteness might well be the result of some hidden, unexpressed variablity that is located inside the FRC, as exemplified by an overt expression like *he thinks* in (5):

(5)   every student studies what(ever) he thinks is useful for society

But (5) undoubtedly has a definite (universal) interpretation. Likewise, the variablity may also be induced by different temporal relativizations of *useful*; whatever is useful at a certain time may then nevertheless be interpreted as definite, but relativized to the student at various times. (5) then reads as:

(6)   (the) students studied the subjects that were considered useful (at a certain time)

As pointed out to me by Sam Featherston, some such additional implicit parameter seems to be necessary for the proper understanding of (4).

Jacobson, in assuming that the universal reading is a special case of a definite plural reading, tries to unite the ambiguity between universal and definite reading by a mechanism that picks out the *maximal* set of entities that satisfy the RC. The latter is interpreted by the Hamblin meaning of

the question corresponding to the FRC. The same line of analysis is taken by Grosu. Apart from a technical problem, namely that I do not see why maximality is essential to the analysis (given that the lambda term already is (or represents) a maximal set, so that there is no need for additional maximality) the more important problem is that intuitively there still remains an ambiguity that is not accounted for, and this problem becomes even more severe when taking into consideration the additional variability of interpretation illustrated in (1)-(3).

Given that an existential indefinite reading cannot be obtained from a definite one, the above observation not only refutes the attempted unification, it also invites the conclusion that no lexical ambiguity at all (supposedly of an empty D-head to which the FRC is attached) can be involved. If there were, (7) will be added to the list of problems:

(7)   Ich kaufe nur, was mir   gefällt
      I   buy   only what to-me pleases

In calculating the truth conditions we first consider the set of things that please me, then chose any alternative disjoint set, so that the meaning of *only* gives us:

(8)   If x is something that does not please me, I don't buy x.

(8) is compatible with a definite/universal interpretation of the FRC but is clearly incompatible with an existential interpretation. But what about the presupposition of *only* in (7)? Is there any, over and above what we've already got in (8)? In order make the problem more transparent, consider:

(9)   Ich kaufte nur, was mir   gefiel
      I   bought only what to-me pleased

(9) clearly does have a presupposition, namely that I bought **something** that pleased me; we do **not** get as presupposition the definite/universal interpretation of (9) without *only*:

(10)   a.   Ich kaufte, was mir gefiel
       b.   If x is something that pleased me, then I bought x

Nontheless, this definite/universal meaning was required to calculate the meaning of (9). How can this result be achieved in a compositional way?

If this is correct, a number of questions arise for which I do not have a definite solution. What is it that determines the interpretation of the FRCs in (1) and (9)? Even if the resolution of multiple ambiguities is guided completely by pragmatics, we would like to know which principles are responsible for the fact that in most cases the interpretation is unambiguous. If the quantificational force is completely context dependent, how does the pragmatics work that resolves ambiguity? Are there word order effects? Is there a subject/object asymmetry? How does processing influence the interpretation, if it does? To answer these questions, much more empirical work needs to be done (and hopefully Manfred will find someone to do it). On the other hand, the variability itself seems to challenge any theory that stipulates that the meaning of FRC is quantificational.

References

Grosu, Alexander (2003): 'A Unified Theory of 'Standard' and 'tranparent' Free Relatives', *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* **21**, 247–331.

Jacobson, Pauline (1995): The Quantificational Force of Free Relative Clauses. *In:* E. Bach et al., eds., *Quantifiers in Natural Lanuages, Vo. II*. Kluwer, Dordrecht, pp. 451–486.

Wilder, Chris (1998): Transparent Free Relatives. *In:* A. Alexiadou et al., ed., *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*. Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, Sprachtypologie und Universalien-forschung, Berlin, pp. 191–199.

Wiltschko, Martina (1999): Free Relatives as Indefinites. *In:* K. Shahin, S. Blake and E.-S. Kim, eds, *Proceedings of WCCFL 17*. University of British Columbia, CSLI, Stanford, pp. 700–712.