The impersonal gets personal: A new pronoun in Multicultural London English
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1. Introduction: A new pronoun man (developed form a generic plural nominal form man/mans) has emerged in the speech of young speakers of Multicultural London English (MLE; Cheshire 2013). This pronoun has a number of interesting properties, and here I focus on three, i) man can have an “optionally inclusive” impersonal interpretation (in the sense of Hoekstra 2010), i.e., when interpreted generically its denotation need not include the speaker in all cases (unlike e.g., Standard English (SE) one, or Icelandic maður); ii) man can have a definite interpretation, in which it can be 1st, 2nd or 3rd person (SG or PL in each case); iii) man cannot act as a bound variable. Some examples are given in (1):

(1) a. Impersonal:
   i. Including speaker: Man’s gotta work hard to do well these days.
   ii. Excluding speaker: I heard man eats bare [= lots of] pasta in Italy.

b. Definite:
   i. 1st person: Before I got arrested man paid for my own ticket to go Jamaica.
   ii. 2nd person: Man needs to calm down! (uttered to a friend who is upset)
   iii. 3rd person: Man’s tryin’ a say he’s better than me.

c. Not a bound variable:
   i. [Every guy]i loves man+ij’s mum.
   ii. Only John thinks man’s a great cook ≠ Only John (λx(x thinks x is a great cook))
   iii. I did man’s homework, and so did Andrew. (*Sloppy reading)

MLE Man’s “optionally inclusive” impersonal interpretation makes it strikingly similar to certain other Germanic man pronouns (German man, Danish man, Dutch men, a.o.), but there are intriguing differences, most notably in that MLE man can have a context dependent ‘omnipersonal’ definite interpretation. Other man pronouns are known to be able to take on a definite interpretation, usually 1SG or 1PL (see, e.g., Sigurðsson and Egerland 2009), but MLE man takes on a much broader range of interpretive possibilities: it can be take on any person and number combination.

Previous accounts of the impersonal (generic) interpretation of Germanic man pronouns (and impersonal pronouns in general) have often invoked φ-feature underspecification coupled with binding by a GEN operator, either high in the clause (Moltmann 2006, Sigurðsson and Egerland 2009, a.o.), or locally, in the DP (Ackema and Neeleman 2016b). In this talk I will argue that MLE man does seem to be lacking in φ-feature content, but that it cannot behave as a bound variable in any environment. Therefore, at least for this pronoun, generic interpretation cannot be the result of GEN binding. I propose that the impersonal generic reading and the definite readings of the pronoun are all generated in the same way: an epsilon operator picks out the most salient (potentially plural) member of the person set that is introduced by a person head.

2. A Theory of Person: The theory of person that I adopt to account for man’s wide range of possible interpretations is that of Harbour (2016). Harbour’s theory of person eschews a Harley and Ritter style person geometry in favour of a simple bivalent feature approach, where two features [author] and [participant] (with different semantics and combinatorics to classical author and participant features) pick out members of the full person lattice \( \pi \), which includes the entire ontology of person. Syntactically, a pronoun has at its root a φ head which introduces a variable, which is then dominated by a person head \( \pi \), whose denotation is the lattice \( L_\pi = \)}
\{i_o, iu_o, u_o, o_o\} (i=speaker, u=hearer, o=other; \(i_o\) indicates all sets including \(i\), and any number of, but potentially zero, others; \(u_o\) and \(o_o\) indicate the same \textit{mutatis mutandis}). The features \{author\} and \{participant\} are also lattices, with the denotations \{i\} and \{i, iu, u\} respectively. These features act on \(\pi\) through function application, where \([\pi_F] = [F](\mathcal{L}_\pi)\). A positive valence of a feature means that the two lattices undergo a join operation (each member of the feature lattice is added to each member of \(\pi\)), and a negative valence means that they undergo a subtraction operation (each member of the feature lattice is subtracted from each member of \(\pi\)). No features on \(\pi\) at all (a bare person head) mean that the full person ontology is present.

3. Interpreting \textit{man}: I suggest that syntactically, \textit{man} has no features present on the \(\pi\) head, and thus in its basic form denotes the set \(\{i_o, iu_o, u_o, o_o\}\), which represents the entire person ontology. This captures that fact that the impersonal interpretation can pick out any generally relevant group from among that set, and does not obligatorily have to include the speaker (\(u_o\) and \(o_o\) are also present). The definite interpretation is achieved through the projection of a D head above \(\pi\). This head acts as an epsilon operator (von Heusinger 2004), and introduces a choice function which picks out a contextually salient individual from the set of individuals that the \(\pi\) lattice includes. Since the \(\pi\) lattice of \textit{MLE man} is not constrained (there is no feature specification on \(\pi\)), the choice function can pick out \textit{any} contextually relevant (potentially plural) member of the set, and thus the definite meaning of \textit{MLE man} spans all persons and numbers. Since \textit{man} cannot be bound, the optionally inclusive generic interpretation of \textit{man} could not be generated through binding of the variable introduced at the base of the pronoun: instead, I suggest that the generic reading is generated in the same way as the definite readings. In this case, D picks out a very large plural individual which includes all of those contextually relevant members for which the predicate holds (this could be, e.g., all/most Italian people in the example in 1.a.ii). The fact that \textit{man} cannot act as a bound variable is the result of \textit{man} obligatorily projecting a D head, which binds off the variable introduced lower down in the pronoun, blocking binding from an external source. I do not make the stronger claim that all generic interpretations of impersonal pronouns are generated in this way: indeed, I suggest that a GEN-binding approach appears feasible for some other impersonal pronouns (such as standard English \textit{one}). However, I do claim that the binding approach is not the only way to generate the impersonal reading, and that it should not be taken for granted that it is the right way to analyse generic readings of impersonals cross-linguistically.

4. References:


