

OLIVER AND SMILEY ON THE COLLECTIVE–DISTRIBUTIVE OPPOSITION

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ABSTRACT: Two objections are raised against Oliver and Smiley’s analysis of the collective–distributive opposition in their 2016 book: (1) They take it as a basic premise that the collective reading of ‘baked a cake’ corresponds to a predicate different from its distributive reading, and the same applies to all predicate expressions that admit both a collective and a distributive interpretation. At the same time, however, they argue that inflectional forms of the same lexeme (such as ‘is a man’ and ‘are men’) reveal a univocity that should be preserved in a formal representation of English. These two assumptions sit uneasily. (2) In developing their analysis, Oliver and Smiley come to the conclusion that even a singular predication such as ‘Tom baked a cake’ must be regarded as ambiguous between a collective and a distributive reading. This is so artificial that it hardly makes sense, and yet there seems to be no way out of the difficulty unless we are prepared to give up the basic premise just mentioned.

KEYWORDS: Alex Oliver, collective predicate, distributive predicate, plural logic, plural predication, Timothy Smiley

Introduction

Oliver and Smiley’s book *Plural Logic* (1st ed. 2013, 2nd revised and enlarged ed. 2016) is arguably one of the most important references on plural logic today. In turn, the way in which they analyse the collective–distributive opposition in this book, from the outset, is quite central to it:

A predicate F is *distributive* if it is analytic that F is true of some things iff it is true of each of them separately. It is *collective* if it is not distributive. (Oliver and Smiley 2016, 3)

In this definition, as we can see, the collective–distributive opposition is characterized as a distinction between two different kinds of predicates. On a different view, however, the collective–distributive opposition is seen as arising not from two different kinds of predicates, but from two different forms of predication (i.e. from two different ways in which a single predicate can be applied to a plurality

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of objects in relation to a given argument place, cf. e.g. Yi 2005, 480ff.; McKay 2006, 98ff.)

In the present note, I will raise two objections ('the double standard objection' and 'the singular case objection') to the way in which Oliver and Smiley articulate their position on the matter in their book. As we shall see, the second objection poses a problem for any other approach in which the collective–distributive opposition is characterized as a distinction between two different kinds of predicates.

Objection 1 (The Double Standard Objection)

In relation to the possibility of formalizing 'is a man' and 'are men' by means of two different predicate symbols, Oliver and Smiley (2016) claim (to my mind, convincingly) that

'is a man' and 'are men' are different inflectional forms of the same predicate, and we think that a formal representation of English should preserve this univocity. (115)

Just one page later, however, they point to

a common feature of English predicate expressions, namely that they may be construed either as collective predicates ... or as distributive ones. (116)

and they observe such a 'feature' to be very common indeed:

This is not a universal trait: some expressions can only be read distributively, e.g. 'is a man/are men,' and others only collectively, e.g. 'are compatriots.' But we venture the following qualified generalization. Whenever an expression may be read as a collective predicate which can be true of a single thing, there is also a distributive reading of the same expression. For example, 'baked a cake' may be read as a collective predicate—'baked a cake.'—which can incidentally be true of a single thing, and there is indeed a corresponding distributive—'baked a cakea.' (116)

It seems to me that they are applying a double standard here. Indeed, if inflectional forms of the same lexeme, such as 'is a man' and 'are men,' reveal a univocity that should be preserved in a formal representation of English, then it is hard to accept that a single predicate expression such as 'baked a cake' (and likewise in a vast majority of cases) must be regarded as equivocal with respect to its collective and distributive readings. While the former claim is totally convincing, the latter is not. It is much more intuitive, indeed, to assume that 'baking a cake is baking a cake' (i.e. that it is one and the same thing) whether people do it individually or collectively. This suggests that the difference between collective and distributive uses of 'baked a cake' lies in two different ways in which a single predicate can be

applied to its arguments, rather than in the existence of two distinct predicates that corresponded to that predicate phrase.

Objection 2 (The Singular Predication Objection)

The second problem concerns the application of Oliver and Smiley's characterization of the collective–distributive opposition to singular predications. Indeed, if we are to take seriously that 'baked a cake_c' (collective) and 'baked a cake_d' (distributive) are two different predicates, the question arises as to which of them features in a singular predication such as 'Tom baked a cake.' And the same problem will arise with any other singular predication in which the predicate expression admits both a collective and a distributive reading.

Oliver and Smiley's answer to this difficulty is disconcertingly simple:

Even the singular predication 'Tom baked a cake' is ambiguous, but harmlessly so. For by univocity, this singular sentence must share 'baked a cake_d' with the plural 'Tom and Dick baked a cake_d,' and it must also share 'baked a cake_c.' with 'Tom and Dick baked a cake_c.' (116)

However, this purported ambiguity is too hard to swallow. Indeed, given that the distinction made by Oliver and Smiley between 'baked a cake_c' and 'baked a cake_d' depends on whether we can infer the singular from the plural (i.e. on whether we can infer 'Tom baked a cake' from 'Tom and Dick baked a cake'), it does not make sense to say that the singular case ('Tom baked a cake') is itself subject to the same ambiguity. Or, to put it conversely: if the singular case was really ambiguous between a collective and a distributive reading, then Oliver and Smiley's initial characterization of the collective–distributive opposition would be defective, because it refers to whether a predicate that is true of some things is also true of them separately, without specifying if the latter (i.e. 'being true of each thing separately') has to be understood in turn in a collective or in a distributive way.

Besides, for a sentence to be ambiguous it must have various possible meanings, i.e. we need to be able to specify what the different ways in which it can be understood are. In turn, these meanings should differ from one another in either truth conditions, justification conditions or any other semantic or pragmatic aspect. Furthermore, the context of utterance should normally be enough to pick up which of the possible meanings of the sentence is the one intended in one particular utterance, and once we have done that, the utterance in question will only grant those inferences in which it is that particular meaning and not another, the one that plays a role. Otherwise we would be committing a fallacy of equivocation.

None of these aspects appear to be present, however, in the case at hand. Indeed, Oliver and Smiley make no attempt to give a content to the putative

difference in meaning between ‘Tom baked a cake_c’ and ‘Tom baked a cake_a’, and there appears to be no coherent way to do so. Notice, in particular, that ‘Tom baked a cake_c’ cannot be equated with ‘Tom cooperated in baking a cake,’ because that would make it derivable from ‘Tom and Dick baked a cake_c,’ thus invalidating Oliver and Smiley’s definition of the collective–distributive opposition.

Furthermore, Oliver and Smiley appear to be suggesting that any utterance of the sentence ‘Tom baked a cake’ will simultaneously have the two meanings in question (i.e. that it will simultaneously mean ‘Tom baked a cake_c’ and ‘Tom baked a cake_a’), something that again would be utterly atypical for an ambiguous expression.

All of this is so artificial, in sum, that it hardly makes sense. And there seems to be no way out of this difficulty, unless Oliver and Smiley are prepared to withdraw their characterization of the collective–distributive opposition in the first place. Indeed, for as long as the collective and distributive readings of a predicate expression such as ‘baked a cake’ are regarded as derived from two different predicates, the question will arise as to which of them features in a singular predication such as ‘Tom baked a cake.’ And there appears to be no way to give a coherent answer to that question.

This objection does not only apply to Oliver and Smiley’s analysis. In fact, any approach in which the collective–distributive opposition is characterized as a distinction between two different kinds of predicates (such as Linnebo 2017, §1.1; Florio & Linnebo 2021, §2.3) will sooner or later have to face this difficulty. This is all the more worrisome given that predicate expressions that admit both a collective and a distributive reading (like ‘baked a cake’) are by far the most common, at least in English.¹

References

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