

RAISING AND CONTROLLING AMBIGUITIES

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1. Introduction

The sentence in (1), headed by the French verb *promettre* ‘to promise’, is ambiguous between the two readings paraphrased in (2):

- (1) Marie promet d’être une bonne étudiante.
M. promises of to be a good student. ‘Marie promises to be a good student’
- (2) a. Marie makes the promise of being a good student.
b. Marie is promising as a student.

Ruwet (1972) argues that these readings should be related to the deep structure configurations of EQUI/Control and Raising verbs. In GB terms, the distinction can be expressed as in (3):

- (3) a. Control NP_i V [PRO_i V_{inf}]
b. Raising NP_i V [t_i V_{inf}]

Under Ruwet insight, the reading (2a) corresponds to the Control structure (3a): the subject is base generated as the subject of the main clause, where it receives an Agent role from *promettre*. The subject is then interpreted as the entity that is making the promise. In the reading (2b), the subject only seems to establish a thematic relation with the verb in the infinitival clause, but not with the main verb *promettre*. Thus, the subject is not making any promise, the sentence rather expressing the judgment of an unexpressed entity—typically, the speaker who utters the sentence—regarding the potential of the subject as a student. The absence of a thematic relation with the main verb is parallel to a case of Raising, and under the reading (2b), the subject in (1) would be generated as subject of the infinitival verb, and raised to its surface position to yield the s-structure in (3b)¹.

¹ For convenience, we refer to the two interpretations of (1) as the Control reading (2a) and Raising reading (2b), regardless of whether Control or Raising is the correct way to analyze them.

Under this analysis, there needs to be two distinct verbs *promettre* in the grammar of French, with different argument structures. As Ruwet himself points out in later work (Ruwet 1983, 1991), this treatment of the ambiguity of (1)—lexical homonymy—is unsatisfactory in many respects. For one thing, the phenomena characterizes a much larger class of verbs than verbs like *promettre*. Furthermore, the approach does not shed any light onto a series of semantic and syntactic properties that correlate with the two types of readings exemplified in (2). In this paper, we propose an analysis of this ambiguity which is based on the assumption that the rules combining expressions can introduce meaning distinctions (see Lamarche, 2003, to appear). Under this approach, the difference of reading in (1) is not dependant on the verb having more than one meaning or lexical entry, but on how syntax combines the different parts of the sentence. The ambiguity of (1) then follows from a process that exists elsewhere in the grammar.

The paper is organized in the following manner. In section 2, we present facts discussed in Ruwet (1972, 1991) that indicates the shortcomings of an approach based on homonymy. In section 3, the approach to the construction of meaning taken here is illustrated through a discussion of copular constructions, and is then applied to the account for the ambiguity of (1).

2. Control and raising properties

In this section, we discuss certain of the facts discussed in Ruwet (1972, 1991), which first leads him to assume that the reading in (2b) is a case of Raising, and then to conclude that it applies to a larger class of verbs than what he believed at first. The section starts with a discussion of the basic semantic properties that are associated with the two readings, and then discusses syntactic properties that correlate with the distinction.

2.1. *Semantics of the subject*

Ruwet (1983, 1991) notices that verbs which are considered to be Control verbs display properties of Raising when their subject is non agentive². Roughly, he observes that for a whole class of verbs, the following correlations holds:

² Ruwet talks about the \pm human nature of the subject; but, as Rooryck (1990) points out, the relevant notion seems to be agentive of volitional entity.

- (4) a. i. Control reading has an agentive Subject.
 ii. The infinitival complement reflects a statement/point of view of the subject of the main verb.
 b. i. Raising reading has a non agentive Subject.
 ii. The infinitival complement describes a State of Affairs (SOA) that reflects the attitude of an unexpressed entity—typically the speaker—with respect to the subject of the main verb.

In the Control reading of (1) for example, the infinitival complement corresponds to a statement that the subject is making. This is not so in the Raising interpretation: the infinitival complement is not a statement made by the subject. Rather, it describes a State of Affairs (SOA) the speaker believes will be true about the subject of the sentence.

Ruwet notices that there are not many cases where the Raising interpretation is possible if the subject is human (he mentions *promettre*, *risquer* and *menacer*). However, if the subject is not human, then many verbs that would be considered true Control verbs take on an interpretation that has the properties described in (4b). The following examples are adapted from Ruwet (1991):

- (5) La solution du problème accepte d’/exige d’/demande à être révisée.
 the solution to the problem accepts of/requires of/demands to be revised
 ‘The solution to the problem this accepts/requires/demands a revision.’

The subject has no agentive value in the reading of these sentences: rather, the sentence is interpreted as a judgment of an unnamed entity, typically the person who utters the sentence, with respect to the potential revision that could be made to the subject³. Ruwet gives dozens of similar examples with other typical Control verbs, such as *prétendre* ‘pretend’, *réussir* ‘succeed’, *accepter* ‘accept’, etc. There are many nuances and differences depending on the verb, but the correlations in (4) nevertheless appears to hold in all the cases he discusses.

³ This reading is not to be confused with cases in which a non human subject retains the agentive properties of the Control reading by personification or metonymy. Consider the cases in (i):

- (i) a. Washington prétend avoir développé une arme terrifiante.
 ‘Washington pretends to have developed a terrifying weapon.’
 b. Cette théorie prétend avoir tout expliqué.
 ‘This theory pretends to have explained everything.’

We understand that in (ia), Washington refers to the people in government, and in (ib) *cette théorie* as the person who proposes the theory. These are different than the cases discussed above, where the subject has no agentive properties (see Ruwet, 1991).

2.2. Syntactic properties

If the semantics of the Raising reading (i.e., absence of a thematic relation between the subject and the main verb) is an indication of its similarity to Raising verbs, it is actually a syntactic test—the so called *en*-avant test—that leads Ruwet (1972) to argue for the Raising nature of this interpretation.

This test refers to cases where the French clitic *en* ‘of it’ seems to be extracted from the subject position in the sentence, as opposed to the general case where it comes from inside the VP. Consider for example the sentences in (6):

- (6) a. L’auteur de ce livre est génial.
 the author of this book is brilliant
 b. L’auteur en est génial. (*en* = de ce livre)
 the author of-it is brilliant

The pronoun *en* in (6b) can replace the underlined PP in (6a), which appears as a complement of the noun in subject position.

The relevance of *en*-avant is that with a true Raising verb like *sembler* ‘to seem’, the *en* that finds its source in the subject position will appear separated from the subject, attached to the verb in the infinitival clause. For example, in (7a) (example (8) from Ruwet, 1991:57) *en* appears on the verb in the infinitival clause, even if it relates the surface subject of *sembler* in the main clause.

- (7) a. L’auteur [de ce livre] semble en être génial.
 the author [of this book] seems of-it to be brilliant
 b. * L’auteur [de ce livre] prétend en être génial.
 the author [of this book] pretends of-it to be brilliant.

In contrast, in a Control construction such as (7b), attaching a *en* that refers to the complement of the main subject to the subordinate verb leads to an ungrammatical result. Ruwet took this as a strong argument for the Raising distinction: assuming that the subject of Raising verb is generated as subject of *être génial* in (7a), and that the cliticization rule applies before the subject is raised to its surface position—subject of *semble*—then the presence of *en* inside the subordinate clause is not so mysterious. Given that the subject of Control verbs would never appear as subject of the subordinate clause, then the contrast is explained directly.

For the reasons exposed in Talmoski (1990), the argumentation based on *en* could no longer be used to argue for a structural distinction between Raising and Control. Independantly, the significant thing for us is that there is a correlation between the placement of *en* and the non agentive nature of the subject of the verb.

For example, with *promettre*, *en* can appear on the infinitival verb in the subordinate clause when the subject is non agentive, as in (8a), but not if the subject is agentive, as in (8b):

- (8) a. La préface [de ce livre] promet d'en être intéressante.
the preface [of this book] promises of-it to be interesting.
b. * L'auteur [de ce livre] promet d'en être présent.
the author [of this book] promises of-it to be present.

The correlation between the placement of *en* and nature of the subject can be extended to many different types of verbs, even for the “true” Control verbs that occur in the following example (see also examples (41)-(47) in Ruwet 1991):

- (9) a. * Le fondateur [de l'empire] ne prétend pas en être omniscient.
The founder [of the empire] does not claim of-it to be omniscient.
b. La liste [de ces verbes] ne prétend pas en être exhaustive.
The list [of these verbs] does not claim of-it to be exhaustive.

When the subject is non agentive, as in (9b), it becomes possible to have *en* in the subordinate clause of the sentence, even when the main predicate is headed by a Control verb. This is impossible if the subject is agentive, as in (9a)⁴.

Another property that correlates with the distinction in readings concerns the argument structure of certain verbs (Ruwet 1972). One of the cases discussed by Ruwet concerns the presence of the PP complement with *promettre* in (10a).

- (10) a. Le patron promet à Justine de l'engager.
The boss promises Justine to hire her.
b. La préface promet (*à l'éditeur) d'être intéressante.
The preface promises (the editor) to be interesting.

⁴ Ruwet's position leads him to a broader notion of Raising than what is often assumed. Given that for him, (9b) is a case of Raising, and that in this case the subject must be non agentive, his definition of the notion implies that a Raising verb imposes specific restrictions on its surface subject. This position is criticized in Rooryck (1989,1990), who assumes that the *only* criteria to determine whether a verb is a Raising verb is precisely that it imposes no restriction on its subject (all the restrictions on the subject depend on the verb in the subordinate clause). Under this definition, then, the case depicted in (9b) is not an instance of Raising. Notice that having only one criteria to determine what is a Raising verb strongly undermines the notion itself.

Under the Control reading, the verb can optionally take an indirect object to indicate to whom the promise is made. What we see is that when *promettre* has a Raising reading—as is in (10b)—then the presence of a PP is not possible.

The placement of *en* and the argument structure of the verb are only some of the properties that correlate with the two readings—agentive/Control versus Nonagentive/Raising—that many verbs can have under appropriate circumstances. The facts are far more complicated than what we made them to be here (see Ruwet 1991 for more discussion). The incomplete picture presented here still raises the question: what is behind the capacity of such verbs to display such radically different readings, and why are these readings related to syntactic differences?

Rooryck (1989, 1990) tackles some of the issues discussed in Ruwet (1983), and makes a number of interesting observations—notably about the placement of *en*—that places some of Ruwet’s conclusions under a different light. However, what he concludes does not shed any light regarding the correlation in (4). For example, he argues that the ambiguity of (1) is a case of lexical homonymy. Resorting to homonymy, as far as we are concerned, is never a solution one can *argue* for, because it is only a statement of the facts. Furthermore, his analysis lacks any generality in that he claims that for a “true” Control verb like *prétendre* in (9b), an unspecified process of desagentivisation is at work.

In the next section, we outline an account of the ambiguity of (1) that provides a formal reality to this notion of desagentivisation, and that could in principle apply to all cases discussed by Ruwet.

3. The ambiguity of syntax

The analysis we want to pursue is that the ambiguity of (1) does not depend on a lexical difference, but on how the infinitival complement is combined with the verb. The hypothesis is that terms are underspecified with respect to two basic semantic distinctions in grammar, and get to acquire one of these distinctions when syntax combines the terms to create phrases and sentences. We assume the existence of two distinct rules that each introduces a different value when it combines two nodes. Generally, the content of the two nodes combined is such that only one of the two rules can apply felicitously, the application of the other rule leading to an impossible result. However, there are cases where the content of the two nodes is such that the application of the two rules yields possible results, leading to an ambiguity. We want to argue that the ambiguity of sentence (1) is precisely such a case. Section 2.1 presents the two rules and illustrates their application by discussing certain copular constructions. This leads the way to the analysis of the ambiguity of (1) in section 2.2.

3.1. Two rules

The two rules we mentioned above will be referred to as the *rule of predication* (whose function is to describe) and the *rule of identification* (whose function is to name). More precisely, we assume that when two nodes are combined, one is obligatorily seen as either describing the other (combined by predication) or naming the other (combined by identification). For example, the claim is that the application of these two rules to the expression *red* accounts for the difference in the interpretation of the copular constructions in (11):

- (11) a. Mary's favorite car is red.
 b. Mary's favorite color is red.

(11a) is an instance of the predicative reading of copular construction, the expression *red* describing something about the nature of the entity denoted by the NP *Mary's favorite car*, namely its color. The sentence in (11b) is an instance of identity reading, the function of *red* being to identify (give a name to) the entity denoted by the NP *Mary's favorite color*. Whereas under traditional analysis, the difference of reading in (11) would be treated as a case of homonymy of *red*—there is an adjectival *red* for (11a) and a nominal *red* for (11b)—and possibly also homonymy of *be*, we assume that the difference depends strictly on syntax. Under our view, the expression *red* is unspecified with respect to its semantic/categorical type in the lexicon, and only gets one depending on which rule combines it with an element in syntax. In sentence (11a), *red* is combined by the rule of predication, making it a descriptive element with respect to *Mary's favorite car*; and in sentence (11b), it is combined by the identification rule, turning it into the name of something (in the case, the name of the subject).

We formalize the analysis in the following manner. Let us assume that the content of *be* provides the argument position—formalized as in (12)—onto which predicative and identificational relations can be constructed:

- (12) *be*: ()

The two rules that combine this content with other terms are formalized in (13), *x* corresponds to the content of a term combined with *be*.

- (13) a. Predication rule $() + x \rightarrow (x)$
 b. Identification rule $() + x \rightarrow ()x$

The rule in (13a) expresses that x is combined as a predicate, whereas in (13b) it is combined as an identifier. The assumption is that an expression like *red*, for example, would have no predicational or identificational value: formally, it is an constant that denotes a piece of conceptual knowledge associated with the field of vision. Depending on which of the two rules in (13) combines it with *be*, *red* would either be interpreted as a predicate or an identifier.

Assuming that by default, the subject is always taken as an identifier (that is, it will be combined by the rule (13b)), the system allows the following two (partial) representations in (14) for the sentences in (11):

- (14) a. (red)Mary's favorite car
 b. ()Mary's favorite color
 red

In the two representations, the relation between the subject and the verb is identical: the subject identifies the argument position. What differs, and accounts for the difference of interpretation, is how *red* is combined with the verb. In the representation in (14a), *red* is taken as a descriptor with respect to the subject—hence the predicative reading—whereas in (14b), *red* identifies the subject—hence the equative/identity reading.

Whether *red* can be combined as a predicate or as an identifier is clearly dependant on the capacity of its denotation and the content of the subject: thus, with a subject like *Mary's favorite car*, which denotes an object that has a visual appearance, *red* can only be combined as a descriptor. We see the opposite with the subject *Mary's favorite color*, where the subject denotes a specific member of the set of colors. In other words, combining an element as a descriptor or identifier results from the interaction between its denotation and what is in the context.

It is generally the case that the content of the node in conjunction with a specific context only allows one possible outcome, as is the case (11). However, there are case where the two rules applied to one expression in a given context yield well-formed results, leading to an ambiguous expression. This, we claim, is what happens with the ambiguous pseudocleft in (15) :

- (15) What John is is unusual

This sentence can either mean that something about John is unusual (i.e. unusual is a property of a property of John), or that that John himself is unusual (i.e. unusual

is a property of John). These readings have been related to the predicational/identity distinction of copular construction (Higgins, 1973; Partee, 1986; Heycock and Kroch, 1999). Under our approach, the difference in reading of (15) lies in the function of the complement. In the first reading, *unusual* is combined as a predicate, and thus describes the element identified by the subject *what John is*: in other words, something about John (what he is) is described as unusual. In the other reading, the complement is taken as identifying (naming) the subject *what John is*. Thus, *what John is* is identified as *unusual*, hence the interpretation that John himself is unusual.

Space prevents us from going in more details of this analysis and its justification (see Lamarche, to appear). What is significant is that the two readings are not dependent on the meaning of the parts, but on how the parts are combined. Although the ambiguity of (1) is substantially different because of the nature of the terms that are combined, the idea that the source of the relation is how the complement is combined remains.

3.2. *Making and being a promise*

The account of the ambiguity of (1) parallels the analysis of the pseudocleft in that the combination of one part by either the rule of predication or identification yields possible results. More specifically, when the infinitival complement *d'être une bonne étudiante* is combined by the rule of predication, the Control reading arises, and when the rule of identification combines the complement, the Raising reading obtains. To see how we arrive at this result, we must first discuss certain assumptions about the content of *promettre*, and the conditions on its interpretation.

Roughly, the semantics of *promettre* implies the existence of a statement that describe a State of Affairs (SOA), and an assertion that this SOA is going to be true in the future. For example, the sentence in (1) implies that the SOA 'Marie is a good student' is somehow going to be true. The existence of a statement also implies that the presence of is an entity capable making the statement—an agent—and “take responsibility” that the SOA described will be true in the future.

As we saw previously, the Control and Raising readings differ with respect to the entity that is responsible for the statement: in the Control reading, this entity is the one denoted by the subject, whereas in the Raising reading, it is an unnamed entity (the speaker) who is considered to be responsible for making the statement. To allow for the fact that the entity responsible for the statement is not associated with a fix element, I want to assume that a verb like *promettre* does not provide an Agent position in its argument structure for the external argument. Rather, we will have the agentive reading of the subject follow from the fact that the notion of

statement implies the existence of a agentive entity, and a condition that is sensitive to how the complement is combined with the verb. Specifically, we want to assume that in the Control reading, the complement *d'être une bonne étudiante* is combined with *promettre* with the rule of predication, which gives it the function to describe the nature of the promise. If we assume a condition like (16), which states that having an overt description of a statement in a proposition implies the overt identification of an agent, then we insure a correlation between the value of the complement and the nature of the subject:

(16) The overt description of a statement requires an overt agent.

Ruwet (1991:77) provides evidence for the idea that *promettre* has no lexically specified Agent role when he observes that when the verb appears without an infinitival complement, as in (17), the natural reading is not Control, but Raising:

(17) Marie promet.
 Marie promises ‘Marie is promising’

Thus, (17) is not easily interpreted as implying that *Marie* is making a specific promise, but rather that she is promising.⁵ If *promettre* was lexically an agentive verb, then we would expect that the default interpretation would be the Raising reading, which is not the case.

Let us now be more specific about the formal content of *promettre*. We divide the content of the verb in two parts: one that corresponds to the root of the verb, and one to the inflectional head. The content of the root is composed of the function $\text{prom}(\)$ —for *promettre*—an argument position identified by the label prom . In a more detailed analysis, this label is likely to be decomposed further, but for now, it suffices to say that it incorporates the meaning <statement describing a SOA true in the future>. The inflectional head of the sentence is a second argument position, in which the function $\text{prom}(\)$ appears. Thus, the verb *promettre* in syntax would be represented as in (18a), where the outer brackets correspond to the contribution of its inflectional head, the function $\text{prom}(\)$ corresponding to the contribution of the root.

(18) a. $(\text{prom}(\))$ b. $(\text{prom}(\))x$

⁵ The agentive reading only becomes possible if the context makes it clear that there is a discursively salient SOA presupposed.

The subject, by default, identifies the argument position corresponding to the inflectional head, and thus always appears where the x is in (18b). This means that the identification of the subject relates to the notion of promise.

Depending on how *d'être une bonne étudiante* is combined with the verb, the subject will have a different status with respect to the content of the verb. If the complement is combined with the rule of predication, its content is included inside the functor $\text{prom}(\)$. Once the subject identifies the argument position of the subject, we get the representation in (19):

(19) $(\text{prom}(\text{\textasciitilde{e}tre une bonne \text{\textasciitilde{e}tudiante}))\text{Marie}$

The combination of the complement with the verb by the predication rule leads to a representation where the complement overtly describes the statement that expresses the content of the SOA⁶. If the condition (19) that there is an overt agent in the proposition is to be respected, then there must be an overt agent in the sentence. Assuming that the default position for Agent is the subject position (Cummins 2000), we insure that it is the subject who will fulfill this function. In (19), then the subject—*Marie*—is interpreted as the agent responsible for the existence of the statement, and who holds responsibility that the SOA it describes will be true.

In the Raising reading, however, the complement is not combined with the verb by the rule of predication, but by the rule of identification. Once the subject is added, the representation in (20) obtains:

(20) $(\text{prom}(\))^{\text{Marie}}\text{\textasciitilde{e}tre une bonne \text{\textasciitilde{e}tudiante}$

The representation is then parallel to the representation of the identity reading in (14b). In this case, what identifies the verbs are two objects which, if taken together, are the basic constituents of a proposition (*Marie être une bonne étudiante*). This proposition is described with the content of *promettre*, that is, it is described as <statement describing a SOA true in the future>.

In this representation, the complement does not have the specific function of describing the statement. There is no overt description of the promise, and consequently, the subject is not required to be interpreted as an agent. In fact, the agentive reading is not even available in (20), because one of the element that is identified with the verb is the infinitival clause *être une bonne étudiante*, an expression whose denotation cannot be understood as a possible maker of a

⁶ I am assuming that the subject of the infinitival clause is necessarily the subject of the main verb.

promise. The entity that is responsible for the statement must be outside the domain of the proposition. The ideal candidate to take the responsibility for the promise is the speaker, an omniscient agent that is part of every utterance.

Evidently, there is a fundamental difference between the two readings regarding the capacity of the agentive entity to insure the truthfulness of the SOA described by the complement. In the Control interpretation, the entity who makes the promise is also the subject of the proposition that describes the SOA. Thus, the agent has in a sense full control regarding whether the truthfulness of the statement is going to be respected. That is not the case in the Raising reading, because the speaker cannot be sure that the subject will indeed do what it takes to insure that the SOA will be true (the speaker is *not* the subject of the proposition that describes the SOA). The sentence can then only be interpreted as an opinion of the speaker regarding the potential of the subject with respect to the SOA denoted by the infinitival clause.

The approach, although sketchy, manages to account for the correlations observed in (4). Both interpretations of (1) imply the idea that an agentive entity is making a statement, an inference drawn from the notion of statement itself. The fact that the subject of the sentence is the agentive entity in the Control (4a) follows from the interaction of two hypothesis: first, that the complement is understood as describing the statement (it is combined by the predicative rule) and second, that the overt description of a statement requires the overt identification of the agent that is responsible for the statement (condition (16)). The non agentive nature of the subject in the Raising reading (4b) follows from having the complement combined with the verb by the rule of identification, as is the subject. The subject and the complement, taken together, cannot be understood as an agentive entity, so the it is the speaker who is interpreted as the entity responsible for the existence of the statement. Given the lack of control the speaker has over the SOA described by the complement, the sentence is taken as an opinion of the speaker about the subject.

The condition in (16), as it turns out, also seems to be relevant in the account of the contrast between (10a) and (10b). Recall that when a PP argument that introduces the entity to whom the promise is addressed, only the Control reading is possible (10a), the presence of such a PP with the Raising reading being impossible (10b). Although we cannot elaborate here, it is clear that this fact has a relation to the condition in (16): what is overt in the case of (10a) is not the content of the statement, but the person to whom the statement is addressed. This suggests that a general condition sensitive to the overt nature of certain information governs the type of the semantic role of NPs in a sentence.

A final remark regarding the placement of *en* in the Raising interpretation. As we saw in section 1.2, what is peculiar with *en* is that it is separated from the

NP it relates to: it appears on the infinitival verb, but relates to the subject of the main clause, the main verb appearing between the two in surface. Notice, however, that in the representation that is assumed for the Raising reading, the content of the main verb does not separate the subject and the infinitival complement. In the representation, the subject is in fact as close to the verb of the infinitival clause as it is to the main verb. Thus, if the interpretation of *en* is dependant on semantic configurations as opposed to syntactic ones, then its peculiar surface behavior should be explainable.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed an analysis of the ambiguity of *promettre* that is based on the hypothesis that syntax introduces semantic distinction as it combines nodes. This approach provides a means to distinguish the main semantic properties of the two readings of the verb, without resorting to lexical homonymy. Although we have only discussed *promettre*, this analysis can clearly be extended to other verbs because the source of the ambiguity lies in the syntactic component of the grammar.

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