# Am I My Own Sibling? 

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[!!! Unbeknownst to us, the same data point were discussed in more depth in Barker (1999) "Temporary Accommodation: I am the oldest of my siblings"" " !!!]

During a debate on logic and grammar, the medieval grammarian al-Sirafi (Margoliouth, 1905) notes that his opponent considers (1) a valid sentence, but does not list Zaid among Zaid's brothers in (2):
(1) Zaid is the best of his brothers.
(2) _ Who are Zaid's brothers? _ (*Zaid,) Amr, Bakr, Khalid

The puzzle raised by (1) (accepted by all speakers consulted) is that partitive superlatives, like " $X$ is the $A$-est of the $Y$ 's", presuppose that X is a Y (Stateva, 2002). But this presupposition cannot be met in (1): as the diagnostics in (2) and (3) show, Zaid is not his own brother.
(3) a. \#Every one of Zaid's brothers, including Zaid, came.
b. Context: Zaid's father has exactly four sons: Zaid, Amr, Bakr and Khalid. \# Three of Zaid's brothers came. (proper partitive constraint, Jackendoff (1977))

Characterization of the puzzle. Other operators, like only or first, and other partitives, like out of or among, are also read as including the subject among the subject's siblings (al-Sirafi's reading). (4d) shows that a partitive structure is crucial for al-Sirafi's reading.
(4) a. I am the only one of my siblings who smokes.
b. Out of all my siblings, I am the tallest.
c. I am the first of my siblings to get a PhD.
d. \# I am the tallest sibling of mine.

Even when an operator can yield al-Sirafi's reading in principle, some conditions, listed in (5), must be fulfilled for the reading to arise.
(5) In " $X$ is OP out of/oflamong $Z$ 's $N P$ ", Z can be counted among Z's NP iff
a. Z co-refers with X .
b. NP lexically expresses a symmetric relation

We provide evidence for these conditions below:

In support of (5a). When the subject does not co-refer with $\mathrm{Z}, \mathrm{Z}$ cannot be in the comparison set denoted by " $Z$ 's $N P$ ". In particular, (6a) does not entail that Bakr is taller than Zaid.
(6) Bakr is the tallest of Zaid's brothers. \#So, in particular, he is taller than Zaid.

In support of (5b). The noun used in the partitive construction must express a symmetric relation ( $R$ symmetric iff $\forall x, y, R(x)(y) \rightarrow R(y)(x)$ ), as in (7b). The relation need not be transitive like sibling ( $R$ transitive iff $\forall x, y, z,(R(x)(y) \wedge R(y)(z)) \rightarrow$ $R(x)(z)$ ), as illustrated in (7).
(7) a. Non-transitive symmetric relation: friend

Zaid is the only one of his friends who suffers from self-hatred.
$\nsim$ Zaid is his own friend.
b. Transitive non-symmetric relation: ancestor
\# I am the only one of my ancestors with green eyes.
$\rightsquigarrow$ I am my own ancestor.
c. Non-transitive non-symmetric relation: son
\# Zaid is the only one of his sons who smokes.
$\rightsquigarrow$ Zaid is his own son.
Symmetric relations formed compositionally do not give rise to al-Sirafi's reading.
(8) \#Boston is the only one of the cities connected to it that has good food.

But morphologically complex nouns like co-worker can:
(9) I am the only of my co-workers who works at a standing desk.

One clue. Although we cannot explain al-Sirafi's reading, Kai von Fintel (p.c.) notes a related paradox. If other is co-indexed with $I$ in (10), then its presupposition (Heim et al., 1991) should require that I am my own sibling. Here too, the reading only arises with symmetric relations, as the contrast with (10b) shows.
(10) a. I live in Burma. My other siblings live in Tanzania.
b. I lived in Burma. \# My other ancestors lived in Tanzania.

## References

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