Am I My Own Sibling?

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In a debate on logic and grammar, the medieval grammarian al-Sirafi (Margoliouth, 1905) notes that his opponent accepts (1) as 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 to bring about 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, we find that some conditions, listed in (5), must be fulfilled for the reading to arise. Evidence for these conditions is provided below.

(5)   In "*X is OP out of/of/among Z's NP*", Z can be counted among Z's NP iff
       a. Z co-refers with X.
       b. NP lexically expresses a symmetric relation

In support of (5a). When the subject does not co-refer with Z, Z cannot be in the comparison set denoted by "*Z's NP*". 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 illustrated in (7b). The relation need not be transitive like *sibling* (R transitive iff $\forall x, y, z, \big(R(x)(y) \wedge R(y)(z)\big) \rightarrow R(x)(z)$), as illustrated in (7).

(7)   a.   **Non-transitive symmetric relation:** *friend*
              Zaid is the only one of his friends who suffers from self-hatred.
              $\not\leadsto$ *Zaid is his own friend.*
       b.   **Transitive non-symmetric relation:** *ancestor*
              # I am the only one of my ancestors with green eyes.
              $\leadsto$ *I am my own ancestor.*
       c.   **Non-transitive non-symmetric relation:** *son*
              # Zaid is the only one of his sons who smokes.
              $\leadsto$ *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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