

# Reciprocals, Parts, and Wholes\*

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April 4, 2005

## Abstract

The behavior of reciprocals with singular antecedents in Irish is examined. It is argued that they provide important new support for the treatment of the semantics of reciprocals found in Heim et al. (1991)

## 1 Introduction

It is widely believed (and with good reason) that reciprocal pronouns such as English *each other* require plural antecedents:

- (1) a. The children envy each other.
- b. Sally and Anna envy each other.
- c. \*Joe envies each other.

It is a central goal of the analysis of reciprocals presented in Heim et al. (1991) to provide an understanding of why this requirement should hold. The analysis they develop takes the reciprocal to be not an atomic lexical element but rather to be composed of its two apparent parts—*each* and *other*. The element *each* is identified in their proposal with the distributive quantifier *each* as it appears in (2):

- (2) The children have each bought a book.

The requirement of plurality in (1) then reduces to the similar requirement imposed by distributive *each* in (2), whose semantics also plays a crucial role in the semantics of reciprocals that Heim, Lasnik, and May offer.

## 2 Reciprocals in Irish

The Irish reciprocal is the element *a chéile*. In origin, this is a complex expression consisting of a possessive pronoun *a* ('his' or 'its') followed by the noun *céile*, which means 'partner,' 'mate' or 'spouse'.

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\*An earlier version of this paper appeared in the WebFest for Jorge Hankamer. Thanks to Robert May and to Chris Potts for useful commentary on that version.

- (3) Chonaic siad a chéile.  
*saw they each other*  
 ‘They saw each other.’

Although this decomposition is diachronically valid, it seems that in the modern language *a chéile* is unanalyzable. The particle *a* does not vary according to attributes of the antecedent (see (3) in which *a* retains its apparently singular form even in the presence of a plural antecedent); furthermore, the long [e:] characteristic of the noun *céile* is reduced and neutralized in the reciprocal. There is, in any case, no (visible) sign of a marker of distributivity within the reciprocal. If one were pushed to provide a literal translation of the expression, it would be something like ‘the other’.

The restrictions which limit the distribution of *a chéile* in Irish closely mirror those which govern the distribution of English reciprocals. I will not document this in detail here, but simply assert that the antecedent must be more prominent than the reciprocal and must be in a local relation with it. The issues that arise in cashing out such general statements are closely parallel, down to minute levels of detail, in Irish and in English. Some of the core patterns are illustrated very briefly in (4) and (5).<sup>1</sup>

- (4) a. Labhair siad le-n a chéile.  
*spoke they with each other*  
 ‘They spoke to each other.’  
 b. Cháin siad leabhair a chéile.  
*criticized they books each other*  
 ‘They criticized each other’s books.’  
 c. Shuigh siad in aice le-n a chéile.  
*sat they beside each other*  
 ‘They sat beside each other.’
- (5) a. \*Dúirt siad go raibh a chéile breoite.  
*said they COMP was each other ill*  
 ‘They said that each other were ill.’  
 b. \*Dúirt siad go bhfaca Eoghan a chéile.  
*said they COMP saw Owen each other*  
 ‘They said that Owen saw each other.’

So far the picture is a familiar one. Unexpectedly, however, the Irish reciprocal permits singular antecedents, at least in a range of circumstances. Examples on the model of (1c) are, of course, as ungrammatical in Irish as they are in English:

- (6) \*Chonaic Eoghan a chéile.  
*saw Owen each other*  
 ‘Owen saw each other.’

Consider, though, the examples in (6)–(12) (all attested in published texts):

<sup>1</sup>There is, though, no requirement that the antecedent precede the reciprocal

- (7) D'fhill Sáile a clóca ar a chéile.  
*folded Sally her cloak on each other*  
 'Sally folded her cloak up (*lit.*: on each other).'
- (8) Dhún sé an páipéar ar a chéile.  
*closed he the paper on each other*  
 'He closed the paper up (*lit.* on each other).'
- (9) D'fhill sé an nóta ar a chéile.  
*folded he the note on each other*  
 'He folded the note up (*lit.* on each other).'
- (10) Chas sí an léine ar a chéile.  
*turned she the shirt on each other*  
 'She folded the shirt.'
- (11) D'fháisg sí a béal ar a chéile.  
*squeezed she her mouth on each other*  
 'She squeezed her lips together.'
- (12) Bhí a cár ag greadadh ar a chéile.  
*was her teeth (coll.sg.) beating on each other*  
 'Her teeth were chattering.'
- (13) Má choinním mo bhéal ar a chéile  
*if I-keep my mouth on each other*  
 'If I keep my mouth shut.'

The interesting property of (6)–(12) is that even though they all involve singular antecedents, they are still reciprocal in their interpretation (the translations in terms of 'each other' are not entirely fanciful). The reciprocal relations involved though, are not reciprocal relations which hold among individuals conceived of as indivisible wholes. They are rather reciprocal relations which hold among parts of an individual whole. The folding of a cloak, of a piece of paper, or of a shirt (as in (6)–(9)) involves conceiving of the cloak, shirt, or sheet of paper as a set of parts, each of which is brought into contact with the other. Similarly in (10)–(12), the antecedent noun is singular (*béal* meaning 'mouth', *cár* meaning 'set of teeth' or 'jaw'), but the interpretation again crucially involves reciprocal relations among parts of a whole.

It becomes clearer that this is the right interpretation of the semantics when one notices examples like (13)<sup>2</sup>

- (14) na gadhair ag streachailt an ghiorria bocht ó chéile  
*the hounds tearing the hare poor from each other*  
 'the hounds tearing the poor hare apart'

<sup>2</sup>In (13)–(15), the (prosodically weak) initial *a* of *a chéile* is elided following the long vowel of the preposition.

- (15) scar sé ó chéile an páipéar rua  
*separated he from each other the paper red*  
 ‘He tore the red paper apart.’
- (16) go raibh sí scoite ó chéile  
 COMP was it disconnected from each other  
 ‘that it had been broken apart’

In these cases, the English translation which most naturally renders the Irish reciprocal is the lexical item *apart*, an element which (on this use at least) requires reference to an individual conceived of as a sum of its parts, and which further requires that those parts be in motion outwards and away from one another. If something breaks, falls, comes, or blows apart, then each part of that thing must be in motion away from each other part.

The preposition *ó* meaning ‘from’ denotes motion away from the point of view. When it governs the reciprocal, then, it will denote reciprocal motion of parts outward from some central point of view—a very close approximation to the meaning of English *apart*. Naturally enough, different prepositions, when they govern the reciprocal, will yield interpretations which cannot be rendered by way of English *apart*, but which still entail reciprocal relations among parts of the whole. This possibility is illustrated for the preposition *ar*, corresponding very roughly to English ‘on’, in (16):

- (17) a. Tá an teach titithe anuas ar a chéile  
*is the house fallen down on each other*  
 ‘The house has fallen in on itself.’
- b. bhí sé ina chodladh casta ar a chéile  
*was he asleep turned on each other*  
 ‘He was asleep, curled up (on himself).’
- c. gach putóg im bolg casta ar a chéile  
*every gut in-my belly twisted on each other*  
 ‘every gut in my belly twisted up’
- d. Tiocfaidh an cnámh in a chéile  
*will-come the bone in each other*  
 ‘The bone will knit.’

All of these examples have natural interpretations involving reciprocal relations among parts of a whole. In (16), each part of the house has fallen in towards each other part; in (17) the sleeper has each part of his body turned in towards each other part; in (18) each part of the gut is twisted towards each other part, and in (19) each part of the bone joins each other part.

What are we to make of all of this?

These observations suggest in the first place that there is no necessary or general requirement that reciprocal anaphors take only plural antecedents. Reciprocal anaphors may have singular antecedents in at least one circumstance—when that singular antecedent can be interpreted as a sum of parts and reciprocity can be asserted to hold of relations holding among those parts.

These observations may also suggest that Heim, Lasnik, and May are right in attributing the requirement that English reciprocals have plural antecedents to the presence of the distributive quantifier *each* within the (English) reciprocal phrase. In the absence of such an element (as in Irish it seems), the requirement does not always hold.

## References

Heim, I., Lasnik, H., & May, R. (1991). Reciprocity and plurality. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 22:63–101.