Comments on Katherine Ritchie, ‘Collective nouns: Polysemy and Predication’

Chris Barker, New York University, Linguistics

November 7, 2014

Kate’s main points:

1. DPs headed by some group nouns can participate in distributive predication
   (1) The committee ate lunch in the park.

2. They can also participate in collective predication
   (2) The committee surrounded the table.

3. They can also participate in singular predication
   (3) The committee is large.

4. Support: singular or plural pronoun reference
   (4) The committee drafted a law. It/they then adjourned.

5. Metaphysics: groups are constituted by their members along with roles and structural relationships

6. Semantics: group noun DPs denote dotted pairs consisting of an atom (the group-as-one) and a plurality (the group-as-many)
   (5) \[ \text{the committee ate} = \text{ate}(/c/ \bullet \{a, b\}) \]
7. Group noun DPs are not ambiguous, but rather, polysemous

8. They always denote both an atom and a plurality at the same time, like the superposition of two quantum states

My main points:

1. Why is this work important? Kate is exploring the language/reality interface, how we conceptualize the world.

2. Metaphysics welcome!

3. Hesitation on the failure to pass ambiguity tests

   (6)  a. My father is tall, and my 4-year old is too.
        b. #John is older than the committee, and London is too.
        c. #I want the committee to be big, and John does too.

4. Why is the group-as-many interpretation only available for grammatical subjects? (Obvious answer: the agreement drives the shift from atomic meaning to plurality meaning.)

5. Pronouns cut against one of Kate’s ambiguity tests: of course that can’t refer to a group as many:

   (7)  *That’s a committee, but that’s not a committee.

6. If a group DP were truly ambidextrous between singlularity and plurality, why not

   (8)  ??As for the committee, it is old and they are old.

7. One meaning per utterance *(That’s the end of me)*

8. Inside the DP, there may be both meanings; but outside the DP, exactly one meaning is visible—one must be chosen

9. Kate predicts same members in a different configuration must constitute a different group; but if Jeter exchanges roles with the second baseman, you’re still playing the Yankees
10. How thin can the structural part be? Suppose that a group of people is nothing more than the set consisting of its members. Then Kate predicts that DP should behave entirely extensionally. (Seems like a good prediction.)

DRAFT of November 7, 2014.