Scalar and Non-Scalar Implicatures
of Might and Some

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@ CUSP 8, 6 Nov 2015 at Stanford

1 Introduction

• I'm going to talk about implicatures associated with the existentials might and some
• first I'll give (very brief) background on standard scalar implicatures for existentials, and introduce the notion of lower bound strengthening implicatures
• then I'll disambiguate these two kinds of implicated content with respect to their interaction with metalinguistic negation
• finally I'll discuss the interaction between implicated content and focus

2 Two Kinds of Implicatures for Existentials

2.1 Standard Scalar Implicatures

• standard scalar implicatures for existentials impose an upper bound
  – some implicates ¬all; might implicates ¬definitely
• standard account (conceptually rooted in Horn 1972):
  – existentials come associated with a scale ordered by asymmetric entailment
  – <some, all>
  – <might, definitely>
  – if a scalar element is asserted, implicate the negation of its stronger scalemates

2.2 Lower Bound Strengthening Implicatures

• might and some are strictly existential

1 Thanks to Pranav Anand, Adrian Brasoveanu, Karl DeVries, Karen Dusek, Donka Farkas, Valentine Hacquard, Dan Las-siter, Chris Potts, Andreas Walker, Erik Zyman and audiences at Sinn und Bedeutung 20. All errors are my own.

2 Or at the very least, a set of elements over which a partial order can be defined (Hirschberg 1985).

3 See e.g. Sauerland (2004) for a recent(ish) formal implementation of the reasoning underlying this procedural stipulation.

3 Interaction with Metalinguistic Negation

• standard scalar implicatures can be the target of metalinguistic negation:

  (1)  a. A: Paul might come to the party.
       B: Oh, I didn’t know that! We should get extra chips.
  b. A: Paul ate some cake.
       B: Well, there goes his diet!

• but lower bound strengthening inferences are common

  (1)  a. A: Paul might come to the party.
       B: Oh, I didn’t know that! We should get extra chips.
  b. A: Paul ate some cake.
       B: Well, there goes his diet!

• In (1a), B takes A to be communicating that there is a fairly substantial probability that Paul will come to the party; in (1b), B takes A to be communicating that Paul ate a fairly substantial amount of cake. These are clearly not entailments:

  (2)  a. Paul might come to the party, but it’s extremely unlikely, and not worth worrying about.
  b. Paul ate some cake, but it was an extremely small amount, just a sliver.

• Rudin (to appear) gives a formal account of these implicatures, which I will sketch here:
  – truly trivial possibilities, and truly trivial quantities, aren’t likely to be relevant to the QUD
  – therefore, when a speaker makes a claim with might/some, listeners, assuming cooperativity, will infer that the speaker intended to convey a relevantly large amount of probability/a relevantly large quantity (with ‘relevantly large’ defined relative to the QUD)

  • pleasantly, Degen & Tanenhaus (2014) produced fine-grained quantitative data showing that some gumballs is rated more and more natural as the amount being described approaches half of the total gumballs, followed by a sharp dropoff (presumably due to the availability of lexically salient competitors like most)
  • this lends some experimental validity to the notion that ceteris paribus there is a preference for stronger interpretations of existentials

• lower bound strengthening implicatures cannot be targeted by metalinguistic negation:

  (3)  a. A: Paul might come to the party.
       B: You’re wrong that he MIGHT come—he’ll DEFINITELY come!
  b. A: Paul ate some cake.
       B: He didn’t eat SOME cake—he ate it ALL!

• in each case the implicated content is rejected, but not the semantic contribution of the existential

• but lower bound strengthening implicatures cannot be targeted by metalinguistic negation:
4 Interaction with Focus

- it is well known that focus on an existential foregrounds/strengthens the standard scalar implicature
- however, focus seems to background/weaken the lower bound strengthening implicature instead

5 Conclusion

- I’ve presented here a brief empirical characterization of a (to my knowledge) unremarked on variety of implicature accompanying existential operators: the lower bound strengthening implicature
- lower bound strengthening implicatures, unlike standard scalar implicatures, are not targetable by metalinguistic negation, and are weakened, not strengthened, when the existential is focused
- the former fact can be explained by virtue of the nature of the implicature generation mechanism; the latter can be explained as an effect of focus bringing to salience a wider variety of alternatives than are conventionally triggered by the presence of the existential

References