

snippets

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4.

Jacopo Romoli – *Harvard University* *Obligatory scalar implicatures and relevance*

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Background.

A sentence like (1a), unlike the minimally different (1b), sounds odd. However, the contrast is surprising: we know that all Italians come from the same country, hence (1a) and (1b) are truth-conditionally equivalent given common knowledge.

- (1) a. #Some Italians come from a warm country (Magri 2010)
- b. Italians come from a warm country

Magri (2010) proposes that the source of the oddness of (1a) is its scalar implicature (SI) in (2), which contradicts common knowledge (see also Magri 2011). To make this work, Magri (2010) assumes a theory of SIs with the properties in (3a) and (3b).

- (2) Not all Italians come from a warm country
- (3) a. The computation of SIs is blind to common knowledge.
- b. The computation of SIs is mandatory.

(3a) is needed or (2) would not even be generated in the first place and (3b) is needed or (2) would have just been suspended or cancelled.

Magri (2010) obtains (3b) by assuming that SIs are obligatorily computed at every scope site. A question for this account is how to account for the context dependence of SIs. Magri (2010)'s response, building on Fox and Katzir (2011), is relativizing the computation of SIs to relevant alternatives, so that for each alternative, either it's not relevant or it gives rise to a scalar implicature corresponding to its negation. In other words, he proposes the generalization in (4).

- (4) When alternatives are relevant the corresponding SIs are obligatory.

The Problem.

(5a) is a problematic case for (4). It is felicitous and does not give rise to the SI in (5b). However, I submit that alternatives that are mentioned explicitly must be relevant. Hence, given (4), Magri (2010) wrongly predicts that the SI in (5b) should be computed for (5a) in every context.

- (5) a. I don't know whether John corrected all of the assignments, but he corrected some of them.
- b. It's not true that John corrected them all.

One might consider the easy fix of weakening (4) as (6).

- (6) When alternatives are relevant and the speaker is opinionated about its truth-value the corresponding SIs are obligatory.

However, this move is problematic, at least for the SI theory based on a covert exhaustivity operator adopted by Magri (2010) (see also Chierchia et al. to appear, Fox 2007). One argument for this theory is the parallelism between the covert operator and overt “only”. So one would expect that “only” obeyed a principle corresponding to (6). However, if this was the case (7a) should be felicitous with the reading in (7b).

- (7) a. I don't know whether most of the students came, #but only some of them did
b. I don't know whether most of the students came, but some of them did and not all of them did.

In fact, the relevant alternative “most of the students came” would be ignored given the first sentence, but the alternative “all students came” should be able to give rise to the inference that not all of them came.

References

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