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# Scalar quantity implicatures and the interpretation of modality Problems in the deontic domain

Jean-Christophe Verstraete \*

*Department of Linguistics, University of Leuven, Blijde-Inkomststraat 21, 3000 Leuven, Belgium*

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## Abstract

This paper argues that scalar quantity implicatures do not work across the modal domain as a whole, as has traditionally been assumed in the literature, but that deontic modal expressions pose a specific problem for the mechanism of scalar implicatures. It is argued that the problems with deontic modality are due to the fact that expressions of permission and obligation are different on two dimensions: they do not just express weaker and stronger commitment to desirability on the part of some authority, but they also carry different presuppositions about the willingness of the modal agent (the person who is allowed or obliged to do something) to carry out the action in question. The consequence of this difference is that the two types, unlike their epistemic counterparts, do not form a perfect scale. They differ in more respects than just modal strength, and this disrupts the implicature mechanism that works well for the weaker and stronger degrees of epistemic modality.  
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## 1. Introduction

The concept of scalar quantity implicature, introduced in Horn (1972) as a generalized implicature based on Grice's first maxim of quantity, has proven to be a powerful tool in the analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of modal expressions like *possible* and *necessary*

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\* Tel.: +32 16 32 47 75; fax: +32 16 32 47 67.

E-mail address: [jean-christophe.verstraete@arts.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:jean-christophe.verstraete@arts.kuleuven.ac.be).

or *may* and *must*. The basic argument is that the weaker expressions *possible* and *may* form a scale of informativeness with the stronger expressions *necessary* and *must*, just like the weaker and stronger quantifiers *some* and *all*. On the basis of the first Gricean maxim of Quantity (“make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)”, Grice, 1975: 45), this scalar organisation means that a speaker’s use of a weaker modal expression like *possible* or *may* implicates that the stronger expressions *necessary* and *must* do not apply in the context, and therefore also implicates the negation of these stronger expressions.

This scalar analysis is useful in that it resolves a number of classic problems in the interpretation of modal expressions, such as the distinction between possibility and contingency interpretations of the weaker modal expression (Horn, 1972: 113–124, 1989: 209–210; Van der Auwera, 1996; but see also Burton-Roberts, 1984), pragmatic polarity reversal in counterfactual contexts (Ziegeler, 2000; Verstraete, 2006), and cross-linguistically common asymmetries in lexicalization patterns for negative modality (Horn, 1972: 226–251, 1989: 252–261). In discussions of scalarity and modality, however, detailed analysis of the pragmatic effects is usually restricted to modal expressions from the epistemic domain, i.e., modality that relates to possibility, plausibility and necessity in the realm of knowing and concluding. Other types of modality, like the deontic type that relates to the permissibility, desirability or obligatoriness of actions, are often mentioned as a parallel to the epistemic type (see, for instance, Horn, 1972: 124–126, 1989: 263–265; Levinson, 1983: 134, 2000: 84), but have not been subject to detailed study in terms of scalar implicatures.

In this paper, I will show that deontic modality is in fact different from epistemic modality in terms of scalarity, because deontic modality does not show the same range of pragmatic effects of scalarity as observed with epistemic modality. Like their epistemic counterparts, deontic expressions can be described in terms of a scale of weaker and stronger modal values (*may* vs. *must*, *possible* vs. *necessary*, *allowed* vs. *obliged*), but in addition to the classic parameter of informativeness or strength, deontic expressions also differ from each other in terms of the presuppositions they carry (first observed by Davies, 1979: 81–104) about attitudes of what can be called the modal agent, i.e., the person who is given permission or is under the obligation to do something. In other words, deontic modal expressions do not form a perfect scale, because the parameter of informativeness or strength is cross-cut by other properties relating to presupposed attitudes of the modal agent.

Apart from its specific implications for the analysis of modality, the problem dealt with in this paper will also contribute to our understanding of the nature of scalarity. The precise definition of scales has been the subject of some debate in the literature, with various types of “metrics” (Hirschberg, 1991) being proposed to define and measure scalarity, such as entailments or suspension expressions (Horn, 1972, 1989), sortal applicability (Gazdar, 1979) and partially ordered sets (Hirschberg, 1991). The discussion of deontic modality in this paper will not propose any other measure of scalarity, but instead it will highlight the importance of unidimensionality in defining scales: a basically scalar organization that obeys all the traditional criteria of scalarity can still be disrupted by a different type of organization on another semantic dimension that is associated with the same set of expressions.

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