

Politeness, relevance and scalar inferences

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Abstract

Recent behavioural studies in experimental pragmatics investigate the effect of contextual manipulations on the derivation of scalar inferences (e.g. *Not all X-ed* inferred from an utterance of 'Some X-ed'). Among these, [Bonneton et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Feeney and Bonneton \(2012\)](#) suggest that scalar inferences are less likely to be derived in face-threatening contexts. Indeed, they even suggest that a face-threatening utterance of the form 'Some X-ed' can be interpreted as communicating that *All X-ed*. This paper argues that the experimental evidence provided so far is compatible with two alternative explanations of the empirical data: (i) face-threatening contexts block the derivation of scalar inferences, or (ii) in face-threatening contexts the scalar inference is in fact derived as part of the intended interpretation but is less likely to be accepted (as true). Drawing on the theoretical distinction between 'comprehension' and 'acceptance' of the communicated content ([Sperber et al., 2010](#)), the paper proposes an analysis of the results in light of Relevance Theory. In line with (ii), Relevance Theory predicts that in face-threatening contexts the scalar inference *Not all X-ed* may be derived as part of the interpretation of the utterance but consideration of the communicator's 'preferences' (e.g. her concern to be polite/kind) may lead the hearer to judge the scalar inference to be probably false and so to reject it. In such a case, the hearer may go on to infer that the reality is that *All X-ed* but not attribute this to the speaker as part of the intended meaning of the utterance.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of 'scalar inference' has been the subject of considerable debate within pragmatic theory and, more recently, has led to extensive empirical work in experimental pragmatics. Scalar inferences are pragmatic inferences like (1b), which seem to be drawn on a regular basis across different contexts.

- 1 a. Some of the guests have arrived.
- b. Not all of the guests have arrived.

While the encoded (semantic) meaning of the scalar expression 'some' is compatible with 'all', (1a) is often taken to suggest that *not all* the guests have arrived. In general, scalar inferences seem to arise when the speaker uses an

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expression which is not the strongest one on an informativeness scale, like the following: < some, many, most, all > (Horn, 1972, 1984).¹

Much of the debate has focused on the role of context in the derivation of scalar inferences. The question is whether they arise independently of context or as a function of contextual features which happen to be shared by many contexts and thus give rise to the impression that the scalar inference is regular. On the one hand, default accounts (e.g. Levinson, 2000; Chierchia, 2004) conceive of scalar inferences as default inferences, which are lexically associated but defeasible if contextually inappropriate. On the other hand, ‘context-sensitive’ accounts (e.g. Grice, 1975/1989; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995; Carston, 1990, 1998) suggest that scalar inferences are derived only when contextually appropriate. These competing accounts assign different roles to context: according to the former, context cancels inappropriate scalar inferences which arise independently of contextual support, whereas, according to the latter, it triggers appropriate scalar inferences which otherwise don’t arise.

Default and context-sensitive accounts give rise to different psycholinguistic processing predictions with regard to ‘lower bound’ contexts. Lower bound contexts are those in which “all that is relevant, or can be known, is the lower bound” of scalar expressions (Horn, 1984, p. 13). For instance, consider the following example:

- 2 A: Is there any evidence against them?
B: Some of their documents are forgeries.

(Levinson, 2000, p. 51)

In the context set up by A’s question, all that it is relevant to know for the purpose of the discourse (i.e. answering to A’s question) is that *at least some* of their documents are forgeries (that constitutes sufficient evidence against them). When contextual manipulations make the scalar inference irrelevant, the expected speed of interpretation of scalar terms (e.g. ‘some’) varies according to the two models. Default accounts predict that the time taken to derive the interpretation would increase in virtue of the extra cognitive effort involved in cancelling the inappropriate scalar inference (which has arisen automatically). Context-sensitive accounts, on the other hand, predict the opposite: since the scalar inference (e.g. *Not all of their documents are forgeries*) is not relevant, it won’t be derived; no additional processing cost is thus involved. Consistent with the context-sensitive accounts, Breheny et al. (2006) found that lower-bound contexts decreased the processing time of scalar terms (see also Katsos, 2008; Katsos et al., 2005).

In a very interesting further development, Bonnefon et al. (2009) and Feeney and Bonnefon (2012) have suggested that other contextual manipulations, beyond those explored by Breheny et al. (2006), may prove to be equally fruitful for testing default and context-sensitive accounts of scalar inference. In particular, they propose that, along with lower-bound contexts, *face-threatening* contexts may make the scalar inference contextually inappropriate. Face-threatening contexts are contexts in which the face of the addressee, that is, his public image and positive identity, may be damaged. For instance, in a face-threatening context like (3), the addressee might take the use of ‘some’ to be a polite device adopted by the speaker in order not to hurt his feelings. If this is the case, Bonnefon et al. (2009) suggest, A won’t interpret B’s utterance as conveying that some *but not all* the guests at the dinner thought that he drank too much.

- 3 A: What impression did I make during dinner?
B: Some thought that you drank too much.

(Bonnefon et al., 2009, p. 250)

Indeed, they even suggest that A might interpret B’s utterance as communicating that *all* the guests thought that he drank too much.

The primary aim of this paper is to show the methodological importance of the theoretical distinction between comprehension and acceptance, which has been arguably neglected in the experimental literature on scalar inferences. Because comprehension does not require acceptance of the communicated content, it is important to distinguish between, on the one hand, what the addressee takes to be the communicated content of the utterance (that is, what the speaker meant) and, on the other hand, what the addressee accepts as true. These may differ from (and even be incompatible with) each other in significant ways.²

¹ In what follows I use the expression ‘scalar inferences’ as opposed to ‘scalar implicatures’. This terminological choice, borrowed from Bonnefon et al. (2009), is neutral as to whether the scalar inference is to be thought of as arising at the level of the explicit content of the utterance or as an implicature.

² An anonymous reviewer has drawn attention to a widespread equivocation in the literature between two distinct uses of the expression ‘deriving an inference’: (i) deriving an inference as a component of the interpretation intended by the speaker, and (ii) deriving an inference about the way the world is. This is precisely what is meant to be captured by my distinction between comprehension and acceptance as two stages in the process of forming beliefs via testimony.

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