The interplay between scalar inference & emotional valence: an interactional alternative (Poster)

Roxanne Casiez, Marina Terkourafi

Leiden University

r.l.casiez@hum.leidenuniv.nl, m.terkourafi@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Most of the experimental paradigms in previous scalar implicature (SI) studies made use of single utterance stimuli to test scalar inference. While some studies exploring SI in relation to politeness used contextually richer stimuli they often fail to capture the interactional and emergent nature of assessments of im/politeness (Terkourafi et al. 2020). To this end, we propose an experimental paradigm which systematically manipulates the emotional valence of dyadic interactional contexts as a way of empirically implementing face-threat (FT)* vs. -boost (FB)** and documents its effects on SI derivation.

Sun et al. (2018) propose that scalar terms can be underspecified to different extents. This leaves open the question whether the same scalar term might have a systematic preference for either a pragmatic (two-sided) or a semantic (one-sided) interpretation in FB versus FT contexts and how the term's lexical semantics (positive vs. negative) might play into this preference. We hypothesize that scalars with positively valenced semantics are more sensitive to the emotional valence of the context than scalars with negatively valenced semantics. This hypothesis is tested through a three-step experimental protocol administered to speakers of American English through M-Turk. First, positively and negatively valenced scalar sets were elicited by means of an online survey. To check that the scalar sets obtained are comparable with respect to scale distance (Simons & Warren 2018), we next elicited measures of the relative distance between scalar alternates in the elicited sets. Lastly, we presented participants with utterances containing scalar terms embedded in either the FB or the FT version of a range of vignettes, as assessed by them, and asked them to rate the likelihood that the speaker who used the weaker term in a scalar set meant the stronger term. This experiment also measured the perceived consequences of the use of the scalar- containing utterance on the relationship between speaker and hearer. Preliminary results show that while positively valenced scalar terms might receive a different interpretation in FB vs. FT contexts, negatively valenced terms seem to override context considerations such that the lexical semantics of the negatively valenced scalar term singlehandedly changes the valence of an otherwise FB context to an FT one. These results help us begin to unravel some of the parameters of UBELE (upper-bound excluded local enrichment), that Sun et al. (2018) put forward as an important factor determining SI derivation. We additionally discuss the merits of this three-step protocol in terms of ecological validity (Kendrick 2017) and as an interactionally oriented alternative to more semantically oriented investigations of the interface of politeness with scalar implicatures.

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* Situations in which the speaker is expressing disaffiliation, antagonism, disapproval or, contempt
** Situations in which the speaker is actively expressing affiliation, solidarity, approval or, admiration for the hearer

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