

Partition by Exhaustification and the Nature of Pragmatic Reasoning

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An existential sentence in natural language normally leads to the inference that the corresponding universal sentence is false. (E.g. *some of our former PhD students have academic jobs* is normally associated with the inference that some of the relevant students do not have academic jobs.) The status of this, and similar inferences, has been the topic of much debate (going back centuries). Grice has suggested that the inference should not be accounted for by the theory that yields “logical entailments”. Instead, he suggested that the inference should follow as a “generalized conversational implicature”. This has been formalized in subsequent work of the so-called neo-Griceans, who have also introduced a specific label, namely *Scalar Implicature* (SI).

In this talk I will discuss an alternative perspective on SIs – the Grammatical Theory (GT). According to GT the relevant inferences are, in fact, logical entailments, though ones associated with ambiguous sentences. Specifically, under this theory, SIs are entailments of grammatical representations containing a (silent/“covert”) lexical item akin to *only* in its interpretation – the so-called exhaustivity operator, *Exh*. A host of empirical arguments have been presented in favor of GT. However, GT has also been objected to on the basis of various conceptual considerations introduced by Grice (Gricean considerations, GCs).

I will reject these conceptual objections on the basis of the observation (made in Fox, 2007, 2014) that GCs, in their purest form, argue against a pragmatic derivation of SIs, contrary to what is presupposed in the (neo-)Gricean literature. In light of this observation, I will suggest that *Exh* is actually needed given GCs. I will support this view, both conceptually and empirically, by considerations that come from the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of questions (*Partition by exhaustification*, Fox, 2018).

The relevant considerations will also improve on an odd property of most versions of GT. Specifically, the properties of *Exh* under the relevant versions of GT have been stated in a way that is suspiciously close to what is derived by Neo-Gricean mechanisms. Drawing on recent work with Moshe Bar-Lev, I will argue that the properties of *Exh* follow from its role in the semantics and pragmatics of questions and are quite distinct from what is derived by Neo-Gricean machinery.

References:

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