

The puzzle of *some*

LING 20: Introduction to Linguistic Analysis

UCLA · Winter 2022

The puzzle of 'some'

There is a puzzle about the meaning of the determiner *some*:

(1) a. Sam has some of the books.

b. **Situations, assuming there are 10 books:**

Sam has 0 books.

false

Sam has 4 books.

true

Sam has 10 books.

??

The puzzle of 'some'

There is a puzzle about the meaning of the determiner *some*:

(1) a. Sam has some of the books.

b. **Situations, assuming there are 10 books:**

Sam has 0 books.

false

Sam has 4 books.

true

Sam has 10 books.

??

Is a sentence "... **some** of the NPs ..." true or false, when the parallel sentence "... **all** of the NPs ..." is true?

The puzzle of 'some'

Example where it seems to be true:

- (2) If the Russians hacked some of the elections, we need to investigate.

The puzzle of 'some'

Example where it seems to be true:

- (2) If the Russians hacked some of the elections, we need to investigate.

Example where it seems to be false:

- (3) For dessert, you may have some of the cookies.

The puzzle of 'some'

- Why do we sometimes think “... **some** of the NPs ...” is true if “... **all** of the NPs ...” is true, and sometimes we think it's false?
- Let's explore the idea that “... **some** of the NPs ...” has the implicature that “... **all** of the NPs ...” is false.

Testing 'some' for an implicature

(4) **Defeasibility:**

For dessert, you may have some of the cookies. In fact,
you may have all of them. *(seems consistent)*

(5) **Reinforceability:**

For dessert, you may have some of the cookies, but you
can't have all of them. *(doesn't seem redundant)*

Testing 'some' for an implicature

(4) **Defeasibility:**

For dessert, you may have some of the cookies. In fact,
you may have all of them. *(seems consistent)*

(5) **Reinforceability:**

For dessert, you may have some of the cookies, but you
can't have all of them. *(doesn't seem redundant)*

→ **The inference is an implicature!**

Informativity

Sentence S1 is 'more informative' than S2 if S1 entails S2, but S2 doesn't entail S1.

- If S1 entails S2, that means that whenever S1 is true, S2 is also true. Thus, if you know S1, you also have enough information to conclude S2.
- If S2 doesn't entail S1, that means that knowing S2 doesn't give you enough information to conclude S1.
- Thus, if S1 entails S2, but not vice versa, that means that there is 'more information' in S1 than in S2, which means that S1 is 'more informative'.

Gricean reasoning for the implicature of 'some'

- The speaker has said only that I may have some of the cookies.
- **The speaker is following the Maxim of Quantity.** Therefore, their statement was 'as informative as possible without breaking the other maxims'.
- If the speaker had instead said "you can have all the cookies", they would have made a more informative statement ("you can have all the cookies" entails "you can have some cookies", but not vice versa).
- Since the speaker **didn't** say "you can have all the cookies", it follows that such an utterance would have violated some other maxim (namely, Quality).

Gricean reasoning for the implicature of 'some'

- Therefore, it must be that the speaker believes that “you can have all the cookies” is false, or they don’t have enough evidence to assert it.
- **But, the speaker is assumed to know whether or not I can have all the cookies.** Therefore, the speaker must know that “you can have all the cookies” is false.
- Therefore: I can’t have all the cookies, only some of them.

Assumptions, again

- This reasoning relies on the assumption that the speaker knows whether or not “you can have all the cookies” is true.
- But our theory also predicts that if that assumption **doesn't** hold in the context, then the implicature in question **won't** be observed.

Assumptions, again

- You are at a fancy dinner party. The food is set out on a buffet table.
- There is a special table with dessert items. There are many small bowls of things (candies, cookies, chocolates). In fact, let's imagine there are more bowls than guests at the party.
- Next to the bowls there's a sign that reads "for dessert". It's not clear whether guests are allowed to take an entire bowl.
- You ask a friend standing nearby whether it would be okay to take the entire bowl of cookies.
- Your friend looks at the table, shrugs and says, "I don't know; you can (definitely) take some of the cookies."
- In this scenario, your friend's utterance doesn't have the implicature that you cannot take all of the cookies.