Competing for oddness

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Sentences like (1) are odd:

(1) #Some Italians come from a warm country.

On an influential account of this oddness (Magri, 2009, 2011), sentences of the form ⌜some Ps Q⌝ trigger an *obligatory* and *indefeasible* scalar implicature that a more informative statement is not the case; e.g. that not all Ps are Q. Since all Italians come from the same country, the pragmatically enriched statement *some but not all Italians come from a warm country* contradicts common knowledge. The obligatory nature of this implicature renders it impossible to resolve the conflict between the truth of the more informative statement and the implicature, and so oddness ensues.

Cases like (2) below invite an explanation along the same lines:

(2) #Some dogs have four legs.

But, what could the more informative obligatory implicature-triggering statement be? We point out that this question has no clear answer. Consider:

(3) a. All dogs have four legs. ⌜all Ps Q⌝

b. GEN dogs have four legs. ⌜GEN Ps Q⌝

c. Dogs have four legs. ⌜Ps Q⌝

d. Many dogs have four legs. ⌜many Ps Q⌝

e. Most dogs have four legs. ⌜most Ps Q⌝

f. A dog has four legs. ⌜A P Qs⌝

The more informative statement could not be (3a) because it is false, and thus cannot be a suitable pragmatic competitor for (2).

A promising direction is to relate the oddness of (3a) to corresponding generic statements like *Dogs have four legs*. Suppose such statements involve a covert generic quantifier (Krifka et al. 1995), (3b). LFs like ⌜GEN Ps Q⌝, however, are not necessarily more informative than ⌜some Ps Q⌝: (4a), but not (4b), can be true in the context of a newly founded club with no members yet.

(4) a. Members of this club help each other in emergencies.

b. Some members of this club help each other in emergencies.

What about an instance of kind predication like (3c)? This also cannot be: we would wrongly predict (5a) to be odd by virtue of the competitor (5b).

(5) a. Some birds fly.

b. Birds fly.

The same explanation applies to alternatives with quantifiers such as *most* and *many*, as in (3d) and (3e): if they constituted suitable competitors, (6a)/(7a) should be odd given the truth of the more informative statements in (6b)/(7b), contrary to our intuition.

(6) a. Some books are paperbacks.

b. {Most/Many} books are paperbacks.

(7) a. Some barns are red.

b. {Most/Many} barns are red.

Finally, considering a non-weaker competing alternative like (3f) predicts that, given the availability of (8a), (8b) should be odd as well, contrary to fact.

(8) a. A dog barks.

b. Some dogs bark.

So an explanation of (2)'s oddness in terms of an offending more informative alternative is not as straightforward as it would seem at first sight, irrespective of whether this alternative statement is regarded as being lexically (e.g. Horn 1972), structurally (e.g. Katzir 2007) or conceptually (e.g. Chemla 2007) related to the utterance.

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