Once more, with feeling!: scalar interpretations under face considerations

Face, a sociological concept, refers to the human need to both relate to others (positive face) and to be granted independence (negative face). Early research on the interface of face with scalar implicatures [1, 2] found that scalar implicatures tend not to be generated in face-threatening contexts. That is, when what the speaker says is potentially threatening to the listener's face, scalar terms tend to receive a lower-bound interpretation (a kind of worst possible reading). This research implemented face-threat vs. its absence (labelled 'face-boost') as a matter of lexical semantics: in 'face-boosting contexts', the scalar appeared in the scope of a positively valenced predicate (*Some people loved your poem*), while in 'face-threatening contexts', the scalar appeared in the scope of a negatively valenced predicate (*Some people hated your poem*). However, *Some people loved your poem* can also be face-threatening (withholding approval), if, for instance, it is made clear that the speaker wasn't one of them. Thus, while *some* in the scope of a positively valenced predicate (*loved*) still receives an upper-bound interpretation in such cases, as these researchers found, this interpretation will now have emerged in a face-threatening context, challenging the claimed association between face-threatening contexts and lower-bound interpretations.

The problem goes deeper and has to do with what we understand face to be. In Brown & Levinson's [3] framework, using language comes with a risk of causing offence. This risk is measured by combining in a single value (called Weightiness) aspects of the relationship between interlocutors (Power and Distance) with aspects of the act itself (Ranking of the imposition). If the risk is low, the act can be verbalized directly (without redress). As the risk increases, more indirect strategies must be used. By implementing face-threat as a matter of predicate choice (*loved/hated*), earlier research conflated the influence of two factors: the risk of threat to face entailed by the situation before an utterance is made (B&L's W) with the linguistic means opted for by the speaker in this situation (their output linguistic strategy). In an effort to keep these two factors apart, in [4] we constructed experimental scenarios entailing threat (FT) or boost (FB) to the listener's face (this was generally achieved by presenting the speaker as a friend or foe). We then presented participants with the same scalar-containing utterance uttered in the FT or FB version of the scenario and asked them to rate how likely it was that the speaker meant the stronger interpretation. Our experimental stimuli included eight different types of scalars (quantifiers, connectives, adjectives, verbs), thus allowing us to also test for scalar diversity. While we found an effect of the type of scalar, with *some* and *or* consistently generating higher rates of scalar implicatures than other scalars, we did not find an effect of context. This finding is consistent with the literature on scalar diversity [5], leading us to hypothesize that, while *some* and *or* encode a default upper-bound meaning, other scalars are more flexible, allowing for more of their meaning to be contextually saturated. Crucially, we did not find the association between FT contexts and lower-bound interpretations found earlier.

This in turn led us to hypothesize that the pattern found in previous research was due to the lexical semantics of the predicate (*loved/hated*) rather than the face-orientation of the context. To test this second prediction, follow-up work [6] compared the interpretation of positively valenced and negatively valenced adjectives in FT and FB versions of the same scenario. It was found that positively valenced adjectives (*good, funny, clever*) tended to induce more upper-bound interpretations than negatively valenced ones (*silly, bad, ugly*). However, this occurred in both FB and FT contexts. In other words, there was support for a consistent effect of the scalar term's lexical semantics (positive or negative) on scalar interpretations but not for an effect of the face-orientation of the context. These results give rise to some further hypotheses: (1) negative predicates tend to be interpreted more literally (and are akin to *some* and *or* in this regard), while positive ones allow more contextual input; (2) face-threat can be engendered both by semantic content (what is said; see also Hypothesis 1) and by context (by whom/when/where it is said); (3) face-related aspects of context always enter into scalar interpretations, not just when positive terms are used in FT contexts (the prototypical politeness situation [3] is designed to account for); in other words, face is omni-relevant. Closer attention to how semantics vs. context impacts face and to the interplay between them is needed to understand the role of face in scalar implicature generation.

References

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