A note on Contextual Blindness as extended to *only*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Contextual Blindness principle as extended to the exclusive operator only. *It focuses on the interaction between* only *and alternatives derived from a special category of contextual orders, generally referred to as ¨rank orders¨. It submits problematic evidence for the principle and argues that access to contextual information is required in the relevant cases. Its conclusion is that, as things stand, these cases constitute an obstacle to the semantic generalization of scalar reasoning involving* only.

I. Introduction

The Contextual Blidness principle is assumed in the recent scalar implicatures literature. It is especially discussed in grammatical approaches. As Magri (2009) discusses, a major empirical evidence in favor of the principle is the inficility of sentence (1). It is argued that the observed oddness results from a conflict with common knowledge generated by the scalar implicature associated to the sentence. In particular, given the piece of common knowledge that all Italians come from the same country, it is inconceivable that some Italians come from a country which is warm while some other Italians come from a country which is not warm. The latter is, however, precisely the content generated through the scalar implicature.

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

 The principle is criticized in Schlenker (2012). This criticism is then considered, and the principle defended, in Pistoia-Reda (2017) and Magri (2017). In particular, in arguing against Schlenker's alternative proposal Magri mentions that the Contextual Blindness principle

also applies to the exclusive operator *only*.[1] The proposed extension is largely motivated by one of the crucial assumptions of grammatical approaches to scalar implicatures. This is the assumption that the exhaustivity operator, which is held as responsible for the generation of the scalar implicatures, is an implicit counterpart of the exclusive operator (see (Chierchia et al., 2012, p. 2304)). There are, of course, crucial differences between the two devices. These differences concern, for instance, the inferential status assigned to the prejacent sentence (see (Fox, 2007, § 1.3)). As a consequence, some theorists working in the relevant framework do not make any specific assumptions with respect to a possible parallel in terms of behavior and distribution of the operators (see (Chierchia, 2013, § 1.2.2)). In any case, one piece of evidence for the proposed extension comes from the fact that the exclusive variant of (1), reported below as (2), produces a similar infelicity effect, and one that can arguably be explained by means of an analogous reasoning. In other terms, in negating the set of alternatives the exclusive operator is blind to the equivalence pattern generated on account of common knowledge, thus generating the observed conflict (see (Magri, 2009, § 2)).

(2)   # Only some Italians come from a warm country.

In this paper I consider the interaction between *only* and alternatives derived from positive quantifiers scales, standard contextual orders and what authors call «rank orders» (see (Horn, 2009, p. 17)). I discuss that approaches based on the Contextual Blindness principle can account for the first two cases. They can reject Schlenker's challenge. The third case is not explicitly discussed in the relevant literature. However, I submit that access to contextual information is needed in this case. We are then left with seemingly contradictory evidence, which constitutes an obstacle to the semantic generalization of scalar reasoning involving *only*.

II.   *Only* and positive quantifiers

Consider Schlenker's criticism (see (Schlenker, 2012, § 4)). In his discussion, Schlenker launches a challenge based on a symmetry problem. His criticism is based on the assumption that blind operators generate the negation of the universal alternatives with existential base sentences, thus giving rise to the observed infelicity, but they should also generate

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[1] More specifically, Magri proposes that the parallel involves the set of alternatives. As he puts it, the set of alternatives semantically activated by the exclusive operator and the set of alternatives semantically associated with scalar sentences (generally referred to as «innocently excludable alternatives»; see (Fox, 2007, p. 99)) «plausibly coincides»; see (Magri, 2017, pp. 17-18).

the negation of the existential alternatives with universal base sentences. This assumption follows from the formal observation that without access to common knowledge existential and universal alternatives are logically independent. This is based, in turn, on the observation that with empty restrictors universal sentences do not asymmetrically entail existential sentences . But the consequent prediction, as Schlenker discusses, is empirically incorrect.

However, in Pistoia-Reda (2017) it is argued that the symmetry challenge is invalidated by the observation that the non-emptiness requirement on universal sentences is established independent of common knowledge. This defense of the Contextual Blindness principle is based on the fact that base existential sentences like (3a) and (3b) generate conflicting scalar implicatures, as shown by the infelicity effect produced by these sentences, even in contexts in which common knowledge plausibly entails that the relevant restrictors are empty.

(3)   a. # Some Italian kings come from a warm country.

       b. # Only some Italian kings come from a warm country.

It should be underlined that alternative explanations of the observed oddness, centered upon the reference failure of the existential base sentences, are to be rejected based on the observation that minimal variants with acceptable scalar implicatures sound perfectly acceptable. This is shown in (4a) and (4b). The scalar implicature attached to the sentence would be acceptable because common knowledge generates no entailment to the effect that all kings or all Italians should enjoy doing the same outdoor activities.

(4)   a. Some Italian kings enjoy hunting.

       b. Only some Italian kings enjoy hunting.

III. *Only* and contextual orders

The symmetry challenge also applies to cases in which alternatives are derived from contextual orders (see Fauconnier (1975), Hirschberg (1985) and (Horn, 1989, § 4.4)). As an illustration, consider the following simplified context, presented in an extended version in (Magri, 2017, p. 40). A professor teaches introductory, intermediate and advanced calculus. No student is allowed to take intermediate and advanced calculus without having taken, in the first case, introductory calculus and, in the second case, introductory and intermediate calculus. In other words, relative to common knowledge the sentences constructed from the order ⟨*introductory c.*, *intermediate c.*, *advanced c.*⟩ stand in an asymmetric entailment

pattern. The sentences are, however, independent from a logical point of view. I will henceforth exclusively focus on the exclusive operator. With a contextual *only*, a sentence like (5) cannot be constructed as negating the two available alternatives (*Mary got to introductory calculus* and *Mary got to advanced calculus*) but only the higher one (*Mary got to advanced calculus*). However, with a blind *only* the sentence has to be constructed as negating both alternatives, precisely because this operator only checks for the logical properties of structures. The prediction in this case is the generation of a contextual contradiction. In particular, the prediction concerns the potential conflict between the negation of the alternative generated from the lower item in the order (*Mary only got to introductory calculus*) and the piece of contextual information for which such sentences contextually entail lower alternatives. As demonstrated below, however, the prediction is incorrect, because the sentence is felicitous. This is a problem for the approaches based on the Contextual Blindness principle.

(5)   Mary only got to intermediate calculus.

The felicity of the sentence is problematic for such approaches, however, only if we can exclude that the asymmetric reading is structurally induced. This line of reasoning is proposed in Magri (2017) and is based on the observation that the minimal variant of (5), here reported in (6), is infelicitous. The oddness asymmetry could be explained by focusing on the different predicates realized in the two sentences. In the second sentence the predicate *took* plausibly does not induce any ordering of alternatives, as opposed to the predicate *got to* in the first sentence. Consequently, the mechanism governing the blind *only*, which recognizes alternatives as being logically independent, produces the negation of both alternatives in the second sentence. This results in the contextual contradiction, signaled by the oddness observed.

(6)   # Mary only took intermediate calculus.

IV. *Only* and rank orders

I would like to submit that rank orders, to adopt Horn's formulation, or «pragmatic scales», in the terms of (Chierchia, 2013, p. 111), pose a more serious challenge for blindness accounts. Such orders support the derivation of alternatives endowed with the following two properties: a) they are pragmatically ordered, and b) they are mutually exclusive. The latter property determines a radical difference with contextual orders. As we observed, the sentences constructed from contextual orders stand in an asymmetric entailment pattern

relative to common knowledge. In general, it can be argued that both properties of rank orders are extracted from common knowledge. As an illustration, the reader may want to consider the following familiar orders: ⟨*private, corporal, sergeant*⟩, ⟨*sophomore, junior, senior*⟩, ⟨*assistant professor, associate professor, full professor*⟩. Focus on the first example. Evidently enough, it is by mere appeal to our knowledge of the military regulation that we are able to define, for instance, a corporal as an officer, ranking below sergeant and above private, that cannot also be a private or a sergeant. But if we extract such information from common knowledge, it immediately follows that the mechanism governing a blind *only* will recognize the alternatives as being logically independent. As a consequence, they will be subject to negation irrespective of their relation with the base sentence.

It is interesting to realize that a resulting prediction is the infelicity of negated exclusive sentences. A relevant example is presented below in (7). Recall that standard approaches to *only* (Rooth, 1985, 1992) assume that the exclusive operator provides a twofold meaning contribution. This is generally described as the conjunction of the prejacent sentence and of the negation of a suitably derived alternatives set. The partial contributions are assumed to enjoy different inferential status. In particular, the prejacent sentence is taken to be derived with presuppositional status. As a consequence of the assigned status, the inference to the prejacent sentence is supported also under negation. Things are different with respect to the other partial contribution, which is considered as part of the asserted content of exclusive sentences. In negated exclusive sentences, the assertion of the negation of the alternatives is thus plausibly converted into the assertion of the alternatives. If the foregoing reasoning is correct, we can consequently argue that in cases such as (7) the prejacent sentence (*John is a corporal*) is presupposed while the alternatives (*John is a private* and *John is a sergeant*) are asserted. However, assuming the second property of rank orders (which we may call "mutual exclusiveness", or "exactness"), this would generate a conflict between presupposed and asserted contents. It follows from this property that it cannot be the case that more than one sentence constructed from a rank order is true at the same time. But, then, in (7) we should observe an infelicity effect resulting from the contextual contradiction. The sentence is, however, perfectly acceptable.

(7) John is not only a corporal.

It should be underlined that it seems impossible to salvage blindness accounts even by assuming that the mutual exclusiveness property is derived from the semantic meaning of the items. Under this assumption, arguably, a blind *only* would be able to access the information associated with the relevant property. As a consequence, no alternative would

be asserted in the negated example just discussed. With respect to the positive case, the mechanism governing the distribution of *only* will not distinguish between the alternatives and will produce a symmetric negation. I take it that the problem with such an ancillary strategy is another version of the symmetric problem discussed above. Indeed, my intuition is that both in (7) and (8) the exclusive sentences are given clear asymmetric interpretations, in which only the higher alternative (*John is a sergeant*) is subject to the relevant operation, i.e. it is asserted in the first case and negated in the second case.

(8)   John is only a corporal.

I then conclude that access to the first property of rank orders, i.e. to the pragmatic ordering relation, is required. But something more is needed for an adequate explanatory account. To begin with, when *only* interacts with alternatives derived from rank orders we observe a clear emphatic effect (see (Bonomi and Casalegno, 1993, pp. 42-43)). This effect is not necessarily realized when the operator interacts with alternatives derived from standard contextual orders. The observed emphasis receives an independent explanation if we assume that a repair mechanism is activated to reconcile the two properties of rank orders. I describe the mechanism in question as the pragmatic enrichment of alternatives obtained via the insertion of a covert, non factive *at least* operator ((Beaver and Clark, 2008, ch. X); cf. Geurts and Nouwen (2007)). The effect of the insertion is the production of a selective blindness of the mechanism to the mutual exclusiveness property in such a way that an asymmetric entailment pattern is established among alternatives, as if they were generated from a standard contextual order. This move explains the absence of the contradiction in (7), the asymmetric interpretations realized in both (7) and (8), and the inevitable emphatic effect produced by the interaction of *only* with alternatives derived from rank orders.

V.   Conclusion

This paper has discussed the Contextual Blindness principle as extended to the exclusive operator *only*. The evidence discussed involves the interaction between *only* and alternatives generated from positive quantifiers scales, standard contextual orders and rank orders. The claim is that access to common knowledge is required in the third case. The conclusion is that such orders constitute an obstacle to semantic generalizations of scalar reasoning involving *only*, the same as the other kind of orders constitute an obstacle to pragmatic generalizations of the same sort.

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