The semantics and pragmatics of exceptives

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2019

Feb 5

1   Background

Assignment 2, question 2, was a brief exploration of exceptives like *every Muppet except Kermit danced*. The theoretical proposal:

(E) $[\![every\dots except\ Kermit]\!] = \big\{\langle A,B\rangle : (A - \{[\![Kermit]\!]\}) \subseteq B\big\}$

This meaning says that *every Muppet except Kermit danced* is consistent with Kermit not being a Muppet, and with him dancing:

(1)   To show that Kermit need not be in A, just note that $A - X$ is defined for all sets A and X, regardless of their relationship to each other. Where they are disjoint, $A - X$ is just A again. In this case, using the exceptive is a lengthy and misleading way of conveying what a plain *every* claim would convey.

(2)   To show that Kermit can have danced or not, note that subtracting an element from A in this context just means remaining silent about how that element relates to B. For a concrete illustration, suppose $A = \{a,b\}$. If $B = \{a\}$, then $(A - \{b\}) \subseteq B$ holds, and if $B' = \{a,b\}$, then $(A - \{b\}) \subseteq B'$ holds. The second case is misleading because, intuitively, there is no clear motivation for removing b from the restriction.

These predictions conflict with the vast majority of intuitions people expressed; only one person said that these entailments were accurate! A few people amended (E) to add the entailments they perceived:

(3) $\big\{\langle A,B\rangle : (A - \{[\![Kermit]\!]\}) \subseteq B$ and $[\![Kermit]\!] \in A$ and $[\![Kermit]\!] \notin B\big\}$

2   Evidence that the meaning is pragmatic

The following sentences seem consistent. They show that the speaker can at least be ignorant of the truth of the relevant meanings, from which it follows that making them entailments would be too strong.

(4)   Well, we can't find Karl, but we've verified that everyone except Karl has an alibi, so let's find out whether he does too.

(5)   Look, I don't know whether Karl is on the committee, but everyone on the committee except Karl voted in favor, so it doesn't matter whether he's on it or not, because we got our majority.

I also showed a clip from the show Community (season 1, episode 12), in which a character says "All of you are moving on [to Spanish 102] except for Jeff. Turns out you – pause for dramatic effect – will be seeing me next semester. In Spanish 102. Because he passed, you know, and I'm the only Spanish teacher." In this case, the speaker *knows* that Jeff is moving on to Spanish 102 and still uses the exceptive.

3   Derivation of the exception implicature

(6)   Every Muppet except Kermit danced.

(7)   Target implicature: the speaker believes Kermit didn't dance: $B(\neg dance(Kermit))$.

    a.   *Contextual assumption*: The speaker has comprehensive beliefs about who did and didn't dance. That is, for all x, $B(dance(x)) \vee B(\neg dance(x))$.

    b.   Assume the speaker is cooperative in the Gricean sense.

    c.   Towards a contradiction, assume the implicature is false: $\neg B(\neg dance(Kermit))$.

    d.   By (a), this means the speaker believes that Kermit did dance: $B(dance(Kermit))$.

    e.   Then the speaker believes *Every Muppet danced* is true, and it is strictly more informative than (6), since it quantifies over a larger domain.

    f.   Thus, by (b), if the speaker could have used *Every Muppet danced*, they would have (quantity). Since they didn't, we reject (c), thereby deriving the implicature.