The implicatures of exceptives
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2018
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1 Background

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

\[(E) \quad [every\ldots except\ Kermit] = \{\langle A, B \rangle : (A - \{[Kermit]\}) \subseteq B\}\]

This meaning says that every Muppet except Kermit danced is consistent with Kermit not being a Muppet, and with him dancing. This conflicts with the vast majority of intuitions people expressed.

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.

(1) 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.

(2) 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

(3) Every Muppet except Kermit danced.

(4) Target implicature: the speaker believes Kermit didn't dance: \(B(\neg\text{dance(Kermit)})\).

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

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

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

d. By (a), this means the speaker believes that Kermit did dance: \(B(\text{dance(Kermit)})\).

e. Then the speaker believes Every Muppet danced is true, and it is strictly more informative than (3), 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.