

Some is still not *all*, even in face-threatening contexts: revisiting Bonnefon et al. (2009)

SOME literally means more than none, but it is often understood to mean "more-than-none-but-less-than-all", through a process that different theories have characterized as an implicature [5], an explicature [7], grammatical exhaustification [3], or lexical ambiguity [9]. Several contextual factors have been experimentally shown to modulate the extent to which interlocutors interpret *SOME* as "not all", including entailment polarity (e.g., [4]), information structure (e.g., [9]), and speaker's epistemic state (e.g., [1]). Bonnefon, Feeney, & Villejoubert [2] (hereafter BFV) present data which they argue shows that politeness also affects the probability of interpreting *SOME* as "not all" – specifically, that interlocutors are less likely to interpret *SOME* as meaning "not all" when it was uttered in a face-threatening context. In the present study, we present new evidence challenging this conclusion, arguing instead that *SOME* still means "not all" in face-threatening contexts, and interlocutors just think the speaker was lying.

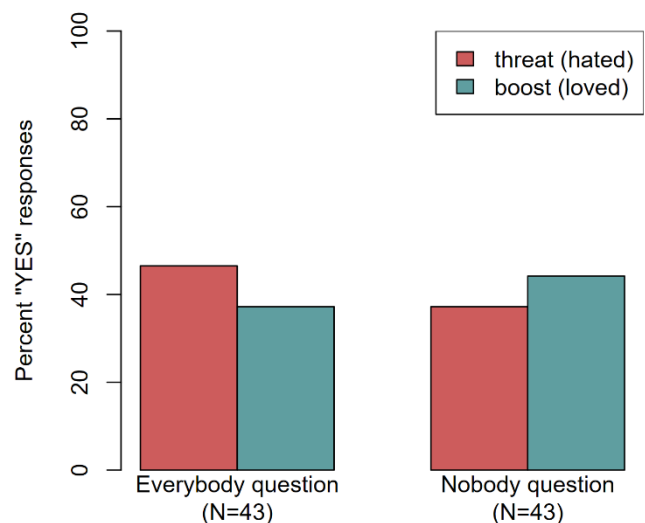
Background. BFV presented brief vignettes which included either a face-threatening statement ("*Some people hated your poem*") or a face-boosting one ("*Some people loved your poem*"). Participants had to answer whether it is possible that *everybody* loved/hated the poem. In face-boosting contexts, participants almost always said "no" – indicating that they took *some* to mean "not all". But in face-threatening contexts, participants were much less likely to say "no" – meaning that they were open to the possibility that maybe everybody hated the poem. BFV argue that this means participants drew the "more-than-none-but-less-than-all" implicature less often in this context; i.e., participants believed that the speaker *meant* "some-and-possibly-all the people hated your poem". (In other words, the speaker wanted the listener to believe "some-and-possibly-all", and wanted the listener to know that's what the speaker intended to communicate; this is what ostensive-inferential meaning is [see, e.g., [6]].) We will call this the "implicature-suppression account".

Another possible explanation for the lower rate of "no" responses in face-threatening contexts, however, is that participants simply do not believe the speaker. They think the speaker really meant, and intended to make the listener believe, that not-everybody hated the poem; they just think that the speaker was lying to avoid hurting the listener's feelings (i.e., telling a prosocial lie or "white lie" [10]). We will call this the "white lie account".

Design. The present study tests whether the lower "no" response rate in face-threatening contexts is due to implicature, suppression or to assuming that the speaker is telling a white lie. We do this by testing whether participants' likelihood of interpreting *SOME* as meaning "nobody" is affected by face threat vs face boost. Recall that *some people* literally means "more than zero people" – there is no pragmatic process that can cancel that bit of meaning, and thus no manipulation of implicature availability should ever cause people to believe *some people* means "nobody", since this meaning does not come from an implicature. The implicature-suppression account, therefore, predicts that face-threatening and face-boosting stories should yield similar response patterns if we ask participants "Do you think it is possible that *nobody* loved your poem?" On the other hand, under the white lie account, a speaker may still *mean* something that is literally false. Thus, the white lie account predicts that participants may sometimes think it's possible that nobody liked the poem. Crucially, it predicts that they will do that more in a face-boosting vignette ("*Some people loved your poem*" – maybe nobody loved the poem, but the speaker is telling a white lie to make the listener feel better) than in a face-threatening vignette ("*Some people hated your poem*" – there's no polite reason to say this if nobody hated the poem, it's just negging.)

Methods. 86 participants have completed the questionnaire so far (data collection is ongoing). Each participant saw two vignettes (one face-threatening and one face-boosting) questions about "nobody" or questions about "everybody". Vignettes were cycled through participants and conditions in a Latin Square design. The vignettes were adapted from BFV and tweaked to make sure that the "you" character had reason to be unsure of other people's opinion and thus had reason to ask someone else (e.g., following BFV, in one vignette the "you" character was not present when others read that character's poem).

Results and discussion. Consistent with BFV, participants were more likely to agree it was possible that everybody hated the poem (47%) than that everybody loved the poem (37%). On the other hand, when asked whether it's possible that *nobody* hated/loved the poem, they thought it was less possible that nobody hated the poem (37%) than that nobody loved the poem (44%). While our current sample size is insufficient for robust statistical inference, the trend of the data is consistent with the "white lies" account. This suggests that **face-threatening contexts don't actually reduce the likelihood of realizing a scalar implicature.**



References

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