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Pragmatic Aspects of Scalar Modifiers

The Semantics–Pragmatics Interface

OSAMU SAWADA

OXFORD STUDIES IN THEORETICAL LINGUISTICS

Pragmatic Aspects of Scalar Modifiers

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This volume examines the meaning of scalar modifiers—expressions such as *more than*, *a bit*, and *much*—from the standpoint of the interface between semantics and pragmatics. In natural language, scalar expressions such as comparatives, intensifiers, and minimizers are used for measuring an object or event at a semantic level. However, cross-linguistically scalar modifiers can often be used to express a range of subjective feelings or discourse-pragmatic information at the level of conventional implicature (CI). For example, in English *more than anything* can signal the degree of importance of a given utterance, and in Japanese the minimizer *chotto* ‘a bit’ can weaken the degree of imposition of the speech act. In this book, Osamu Sawada draws on data from Japanese and a range of other languages to explore the dual-use phenomenon of scalar modifiers: he claims that although semantic scalar meanings and CI scalar meanings are logically different, the relationship between the two makes it crucial to examine them both together.

The volume provides a new perspective on the semantic-pragmatics interface, and will be of interest to researchers and students of Japanese linguistics, semantics, and pragmatics, and theoretical linguistics more generally.

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Pragmatic Aspects of Scalar Modifiers

Abstract. This paper discusses the pragmatic aspects of scalar modifiers in English. It focuses on the use of scalar modifiers in the context of speech acts and the role of scalar modifiers in the interpretation of utterances.

1. Introduction. Scalar modifiers are words or phrases that modify the degree or quantity of a noun or verb. They are used to indicate the extent or amount of something.

2. Theoretical background. The study of scalar modifiers is rooted in the theory of semantics and pragmatics. It involves the analysis of the meaning and use of these modifiers in natural language.

3. Pragmatic aspects. This section discusses the pragmatic aspects of scalar modifiers, including their use in speech acts and the role of scalar modifiers in the interpretation of utterances.

4. Scalar modifiers and speech acts. Scalar modifiers are used to modify the force of an utterance. For example, the use of 'a little' in the sentence 'I am a little tired' indicates a weaker force than 'I am very tired'.

5. The role of scalar modifiers in interpretation. Scalar modifiers play a crucial role in the interpretation of utterances. They help to determine the speaker's intention and the listener's understanding.

6. Conclusion. This paper has discussed the pragmatic aspects of scalar modifiers in English. It has shown how these modifiers are used to modify the force of an utterance and how they play a crucial role in the interpretation of utterances.

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General preface

The theoretical focus of this series is on the interfaces between subcomponents of the human grammatical system and the closely related area of the interfaces between the different subdisciplines of linguistics. The notion of “interface” has become central in grammatical theory (for instance, in Chomsky’s Minimalist Program) and in linguistic practice: work on the interfaces between syntax and semantics, syntax and morphology, phonology and phonetics, etc. has led to a deeper understanding of particular linguistic phenomena and of the architecture of the linguistic component of the mind/brain.

The series covers interfaces between core components of grammar, including syntax/morphology, syntax/semantics, syntax/phonology, syntax/pragmatics, morphology/phonology, phonology/phonetics, phonetics/speech processing, semantics/pragmatics, and intonation/discourse structure, as well as issues in the way that the systems of grammar involving these interface areas are acquired and deployed in use (including language acquisition, language dysfunction, and language processing). It demonstrates, we hope, that proper understandings of particular linguistic phenomena, languages, language groups, or inter-language variations all require reference to interfaces.

The series is open to work by linguists of all theoretical persuasions and schools of thought. A main requirement is that authors should write so as to be understood by colleagues in related subfields of linguistics and by scholars in cognate disciplines.

In a wide ranging but detailed investigation of scalar modifiers, Osamu Sawada argues for a multidimensional analysis that separates out the semantic aspects of the scales from the pragmatic ones. Sawada argues that though these two different dimensions are at play in how meanings are built up, there is a deep parallelism in the way that the notion of scale enters into the calculation of meaning in both dimensions, a parallelism captured theoretically by the way that the mechanisms that compose both semantic and pragmatic meanings are connected through the abstract concept of degree. This provides an explanation for both the particular kinds of pragmatic effect that these modifiers have and for their synchronic and diachronic typology.

David Adger
Hagit Borer

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About seven years have passed since my graduation, and I have had further opportunities to reconsider the data and analyses of pragmatic scalar modifiers. I have also had the chance to investigate the phenomenon from different perspectives, including the interpretation of embedded pragmatic scalar modifiers and the historical development of pragmatic scalar modifiers. These discussions are included in Chapters 8 and 9. I hope I have provided some examples of developments in the book, both empirical and theoretical.

During the process of writing this book, I have received much help and support from many scholars and colleagues. First, I wish to thank Tom Grano and Yusuke Kubota for having numerous discussions and providing me with valuable comments and suggestions regarding the data and analyses concerning pragmatic scalar modifiers and related phenomena. I also would like to extend my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers from Oxford University Press for their helpful discussions and feedback, which improved the content of this book significantly.

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Osamu Sawada

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List of abbreviations

ACC	accusative
ACID	alleged conventional implicature device
BEN	benefactive
CI	conventional implicature
CL	classifier
COMP	complementizer
COND	conditional
DAT	dative
DECL	declarative
DIM	diminutive
EPI.MOD	epistemic modal
FOC	focus
GEN	genitive
HON	honorific
IMP	imperative
INF	infinitive
LOC	locative
NEC	negative evaluation constraint
NEG	negative
NM	nominalizer
NOM	nominative
NPI	negative polarity item
PC	parametric classification
PRF	perfect
POL	polite
PERF.HON	performative honorific
PPI	positive polarity item
PRED	predicative
PRES	present
PRT	participle
Q	question marker
QUD	question under discussion
SUB.HON	subject honorific
SUBJUNCT	subjunctive
TOP	topic

Contents

<i>General preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Aim	1
1.2 Dual-use phenomenon of scalar modifiers	3
1.2.1 Comparison with an indeterminate pronoun	3
1.2.2 Minimizer PPIs	4
1.2.3 Intensifiers	5
1.2.4 Comparative intensifier <i>motto</i> (Japanese)	6
1.2.5 Counter-expectational scalar adverbs	6
1.2.6 Main questions	7
1.3 Similarities and differences between semantic and pragmatic scalar modifiers (Q1)	9
1.3.1 Differences between semantic and pragmatic scalar modifiers	9
1.3.2 Similarities between at-issue and not-at-issue scalar modifiers	11
1.4 Two types of pragmatic scalar modifiers (Q2)	13
1.4.1 Higher-level pragmatic scalar modifiers	14
1.4.2 Lower-level pragmatic scalar modifiers	17
1.5 Interpretation of embedded pragmatic scalar modifiers (Q3)	18
1.5.1 Subject-oriented reading of embedded CIs/pragmatic scalar modifiers	18
1.5.2 Speaker-oriented reading of embedded (lower-level) pragmatic modifiers: The projection of CIs via “modal support”	20
1.6 The semantic change of scalar modifiers (Q4)	22
1.7 Chapter summary	23
2 Landscape of scalar meanings	26
2.1 Introduction	26
2.2 Kinds of scalar meanings	26
2.2.1 At-issue scalar meaning	26
2.2.2 Conversational scalar meaning (scalar implicature)	27
2.2.3 Presuppositional scalar meanings	29
2.2.4 CI scalar meanings	32
2.3 The dual-use phenomenon of scalar modifiers: The target phenomenon	35
2.4 Notes on the status of CI: CI versus presuppositions	36
2.5 Conclusion	38
3 The logic of conventional implicatures	39
3.1 Introduction	39

3.2	Logics of conventional implicature (Potts 2005)	39
3.2.1	At-issue application and at-issue intersection	41
3.2.2	CI application	41
3.2.3	Isolated CIs	43
3.2.4	Feature semantics	43
3.2.5	Parsetree interpretation	44
3.3	Extension of the logics of CI: Shunting type and shunting application (McCready 2010)	45
3.4	Mixed content	47
3.5	Expressive modifiers	50
3.6	Chapter summary	53
4	Comparison with an indeterminate pronoun	55
4.1	Introduction	55
4.2	Comparatives in Japanese	57
4.3	The individual <i>nani-yori-mo</i> and the noteworthy <i>nani-yori-mo</i>	59
4.4	The meaning of individual comparison	63
4.5	Noteworthy reading	67
4.5.1	Noteworthy <i>nani-yori-mo</i> is a CI	67
4.5.2	Noteworthy comparison operates on the speech act	68
4.6	Analysis: The preference-based approach to noteworthy comparison	70
4.6.1	The semantics of metalinguistic comparison	70
4.6.2	The formal analysis of noteworthy comparison with indeterminateness	72
4.7	Deriving the meaning of “noteworthiness/importance”	76
4.8	Discourse structure of <i>nani-yori-mo</i>	78
4.8.1	Strategy 1: The first utterance, the most noteworthy	78
4.8.2	Strategy 2: The last utterance as the most noteworthy	80
4.9	Conclusion	81
5	Minimizer PPIs	83
5.1	Introduction	83
5.2	Some background on minimizers	84
5.2.1	Minimizers vs diminishers (English)	84
5.2.2	Minimizers in Japanese	85
5.3	Empirical differences between the degree minimizer and the speech act minimizer	86
5.3.1	The attachment of focus particles: <i>dake</i> ‘only’ and contrastive <i>wa</i>	86
5.3.2	Presence/absence of the Horn scale	87
5.4	The meaning of degree minimizers	88
5.4.1	Sensitivity to scale structure	88
5.4.2	The degree <i>sukoshi/chotto</i> are mixed content: A granularity-based approach	90
5.4.3	Compositionality of the degree minimizers	93
5.5	The meaning and use of the speech act minimizer	95
5.5.1	The meaning of the speech act <i>chotto</i>	95
5.5.2	Ambiguity between the amount minimizer and the speech act minimizer	98

5.6	Other uses of expressive <i>chotto</i>	99
5.7	Cross-linguistic variation of positive polarity minimizers	100
5.8	Interaction with pragmatic strategies	101
5.9	Conclusions	103
6	Intensifiers	104
6.1	Introduction	104
6.2	The intensifier <i>totemo</i>	107
6.2.1	The semantics of at-issue <i>totemo</i>	107
6.2.2	The negative <i>totemo</i> is an expressive/CI	109
6.2.3	Formal analysis of the negative <i>totemo</i>	112
6.2.4	Discourse-pragmatic properties of the negative <i>totemo</i>	115
6.3	The comparative morpheme <i>motto</i>	116
6.3.1	The meaning of the degree <i>motto</i>	117
6.3.2	The meaning of the negative <i>motto</i>	120
6.3.3	Deriving the meaning of negativity in the negative <i>motto</i>	126
6.3.4	Explaining the distribution patterns of the negative <i>motto</i>	127
6.4	Higher-level pragmatic intensifiers and lower-level pragmatic intensifiers	127
6.5	Conclusion	130
7	Counter-expectational scalar adverbs	131
7.1	Introduction	131
7.2	The Japanese counter-expectational intensifier <i>yoppodo</i>	133
7.2.1	Co-occurrence with an evidential modal	133
7.2.2	The speaker's unexpected feeling is a CI	135
7.2.3	Formal analysis of the evidential use of <i>yoppodo</i>	138
7.2.4	The interpretation of <i>yoppodo</i> in an embedded context	140
7.2.5	Notes on the other uses of <i>yoppodo</i>	143
7.3	The Japanese scale-reversal adverb <i>kaette</i>	145
7.3.1	Scale reversal and counter-expectation	145
7.3.2	The semantic status of <i>kaette</i> : Presupposition or a CI?	146
7.3.3	Compositional analysis of <i>kaette</i>	148
7.4	The variety of counter-expectational expressions	151
7.5	Chapter summary and discussions	152
8	Interpretations of embedded pragmatic scalar modifiers	153
8.1	Introduction	153
8.2	Interpretations of typical CIs (expressives) in an embedded environment	155
8.2.1	Speaker orientation and non-speaker orientation	155
8.2.2	Shifting from a CI to a secondary at-issue entailment in a subject-oriented reading	158
8.3	Interpretations of higher-level pragmatic scalar modifiers in embedded contexts	164
8.3.1	The expressive <i>chotto</i>	164
8.3.2	The noteworthy <i>nani-yori-mo</i> and <i>more than anything</i>	167
8.3.3	<i>Totally</i>	168

8.4	Interpretations of embedded lower-level pragmatic scalar modifiers	168
8.4.1	Interpretations of the embedded expressive <i>totemo</i>	169
8.4.2	Interpretations of the embedded expressive <i>yoppodo</i>	176
8.4.3	Interpretations of the embedded negative/expressive <i>motto</i>	182
8.4.4	Interpretations of the embedded <i>kaette</i>	190
8.5	Conclusion and discussions	196
9	Historical development of pragmatic scalar modifiers	199
9.1	Introduction	199
9.2	Semantic/pragmatic approaches to language change	200
9.2.1	Directionality of semantic change	200
9.2.2	A metaphor-based account	202
9.2.3	Invited inference theory of semantic change (a metonymy-based account)	203
9.3	Syntactic approach to language change	204
9.4	Dual-use phenomenon and semantic change	206
9.4.1	The development of noteworthy comparison (Chapter 4)	206
9.4.2	The development of the expressive minimizer in Japanese (Chapter 5)	209
9.4.3	The development of intensified comparison (Chapter 6)	212
9.4.4	The development of the Japanese counter-expectational intensifier <i>yoppodo</i>	217
9.4.5	The development of the counter-expectational scale adverb <i>kaette</i>	219
9.4.6	The development of the Japanese <i>totemo</i> 'very': The phenomenon of degrammaticalization	220
9.5	Conclusion and theoretical implications	221
10	Conclusion	223
10.1	Introduction	223
10.2	Summary and discussion	223
10.2.1	The relationship between semantic scalar modifiers and pragmatic scalar modifiers	223
10.2.2	Two types of pragmatic scalar modifiers	225
10.2.3	Interpretations of embedded pragmatic scalar modifiers	226
10.2.4	Semantic change	227
10.2.5	Discussion and theoretical implications	227
10.3	Comparison with alternative views	231
10.3.1	Bach (1999b)	231
10.3.2	The relevance theory approach	232
10.4	Future directions	234
10.4.1	Multidimensionality versus unidimensionality	234
10.4.2	Information structure and not-at-issue content	235
10.4.3	The interaction between expressives and at-issue content	237
	<i>References</i>	239
	<i>Index</i>	252

Introduction

1.1 Aim

Scalarity is one of the most fundamental concepts of human cognition. It is pervasive in language, and many linguistic expressions inherently have a scalar meaning: comparatives, adjectives, adverbs, nouns, quantifiers, measure phrases, numeral classifiers, polarity items (e.g., minimizers), scalar focus particles (e.g., *even*), intensifiers (e.g., *very*, *much*), hedges (e.g., *more or less*, *approximately*), exclamatives, expressives (e.g., *damn*), and so on. Scalarity is often used for measuring or comparing things, objectively (e.g., *This building is 20 meters tall*). Furthermore, it also plays an important role in evaluating things subjectively based on a contextually determined standard or personal taste (e.g., *Tom is tall*; *tennis is fun*; *this coffee is too strong*).

This book investigates the scalar phenomenon of natural language from the standpoint of the interface between semantics and pragmatics. More specifically, this book will focus on the meaning and use of pragmatic scalar modifiers, and considers (i) the (non)parallelism between semantic and pragmatic scalar modifiers (i.e., the conventional implicature triggering scalar modifiers); (ii) the compositionality and dimensionality of pragmatic scalar modifiers; (iii) the source of variation in the meaning of pragmatic scalar modifiers; and (iv) the interpretation of pragmatic scalar modifiers in an embedded content.

An interesting point of pragmatic scalar modifiers is that they often have a “dual-use phenomenon.” The dual-use phenomenon is a phenomenon where a degree morphology/scalar concept used for expressing at-issue scalar meaning (i.e., part of “what is said”) can also be used for expressing a not-at-issue scalar meaning (i.e., not part of “what is said”).

As we will discuss in detail, the dual-use phenomenon is quite pervasive in scalar expressions of natural language, including comparatives (Chapter 3), minimizers (Chapter 4), intensifiers (Chapter 5), and scale-reversal adverbs (Chapter 6), and scalarity is utilized not just for measuring an individual or event in the semantic level, but also for expressing various subjective feelings or discourse-pragmatic information such as politeness, priority of utterance, the speaker’s attitude, and unexpectedness at the pragmatic level.

The dual-use phenomenon is important for theories at the semantics/pragmatics interface because it strongly suggests that there are both similarities and differences between semantics (at-issue meaning) and pragmatics (not-at-issue meaning).

The Gricean approach to the meaning/use of natural language often assumes a distinction between at-issue meaning and conventional implicature (CI), which is not-at-issue, although they are both parts of the meanings of words (Grice 1975, 1989). At-issue meaning contributes to the truth condition of a given sentence (which can be represented at the level of semantic representation/logical form), while CI (not-at-issue meaning) does not. In terms of Grice's terminology, at-issue meaning belongs to "what is said," while CI belongs to "what is implicated" (Grice 1975, 1989).

Grice's (1975, 1989) discussion of the notion of CI is brief, with only a few examples provided (e.g., *therefore*, *but*, *moreover*, and *on the other hand*). However, recently (especially after Potts' (2005) seminal work), many researchers have shown there are many phenomena that can be counted as CIs in natural language, such as expressives and supplements (Potts 2005, 2007a, b); honorifics/anti-honorifics (e.g., Potts and Kawahara 2004; J. Sawada 2016), datives (e.g., Horn 2007, 2009); discourse particles (e.g., Kratzer 1999; McCready 2009, 2010); exclamatives (Castroviejo Miró 2010); Japanese diminutives (Sawada 2013a); degree adverbs (e.g., McCready and Schwager 2009; Sawada 2010; Beltrama 2015; Gutzmann 2011, 2015); modal demonstratives (Sawada and Sawada 2013); Japanese benefactives (Kubota and Uegaki 2011); evaluative adverbs (e.g., Mayol and Castroviejo 2013; Liu 2012), etc. (See also Bach (1999b) and Potts (2015) for the list of alleged conventional implicature items.)

To illustrate CI, let us consider the following examples:

(1) (Appositive)

Lance Armstrong, the cyclist, battled cancer.

At-issue: Lance Armstrong battled cancer

CI: Lance Armstrong is a cyclist.

(2) (Utterance modifier)

Frankly speaking, I think this costs too much.

At-issue: I think this costs too much.

CI: I am talking to you in a serious way/in a direct way.

(3) (Expressive adjective *bastard*)

That bastard Kresge is famous.

At-issue: Kresge is famous.

CI: The speaker has a negative feeling toward Kresge.

(4) (Honorifics, Japanese)

Yamada sensei-ga o-warai-ni nat-ta.

Yamada teacher-NOM SUB.HON-laugh-SUB.HON become-PAST

At-issue: Prof. Yamada laughed.

CI: The speaker honors Prof. Yamada.

Potts (2005) claims that the meanings triggered by parentheticals (Huddleston and Pullum 2002; Potts 2005, 2007a) as in (1), utterance modifiers (e.g., Bellert 1977; Potts 2005) as in (2), the expressive *bastard* as in (3), and Japanese honorifics (Harada 1976; Potts and Kawahara 2004) as in (4) are independent of "what is said" and they should be analyzed as a CI.