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Saying Less and Meaning Less*

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1. Some Nice Things about Minimization

Understatement might not seem like a big deal, but it is a force to be reckoned with. The phenomenon is paradoxical on the face of it: *minus dicimus, plus significamus,* say less and mean more. An understatement is a statement which, somehow, because it is conspicuously less informative than some other statement, can be used to express the meaning of the more informative statement. It is not a particularly cooperative sort of figure of speech. Such purposeful uninformativity runs counter to the Gricean principle that one should do what one can to make oneself understood, but it is consistent with the contrary principle that one should do no more than one has to (cf. Horn 1984, 2004; Levinson 1987, 2000). Like its figural cousins euphemism, allusion, meiosis, and irony, understatement depends on a hearer's ability to enrich the content of some indeterminate meaning. Such figures can be difficult to understand, but they have real advantages as well. Saying less means less work for a speaker: fewer words articulated and fewer explicit constraints on meaning construction. And saying less and meaning more frees both the speaker from assuming full responsibility for what she communicates, and the hearer from any undue strain on his credulity.

But why would anyone want to mean less? In fact, understatement is only possible because speakers do sometimes both say and mean very little. In this sense understatement depends on a more general phenomenon of attenuation, or semantic weakening. While understatement says less and means more, attenuation simply says less. But funnily enough, in order to say less, a speaker may have to do more. People regularly go out of their way to express themselves in ways that are less than fully forthcoming, and to do so, they can use a variety of linguistic devices which effectively minimize the content of what they say. The phenomenon is a mainstay of work on rhetoric and linguistic pragmatics (cf. *inter alia,* Spitzbardt 1963; Lakoff 1973; Brown & Levinson 1978; Huebler 1983; Caffi 1999), but it is easily underestimated. Attenuating

* I would like to thank Elizabeth Traugott, Gregory Ward, Tess Wood, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. What foolishness remains is my fault alone.

constructions may seem insignificant, and in a real sense they are — only their insignificance is in fact central to their meaning.

This paper examines some of the ways meaning less can be part of what a construction means. Section (2) develops a framework to resolve this apparent paradox by blending elements of cognitive semantics and mental space theory with a neo-Gricean view of implicature. Section (3) examines a class of constructions, attenuating polarity items, which are conspicuously uninformative and conventionally used for meaning less. Section (4) considers what happens when such constructions are further conventionalized as expressions of understatement, and the types of complex discourse configurations they may come to evoke. Finally, section (5) considers the problem in a developmental perspective, and examines why it is that children seem to be exceptionally tolerant of speakers being less than fully informative. The reason, I suggest, is that children naturally prefer to say less and mean more. The hard thing to master is just the opposite: how to say more and mean less.

2. Neo-Gricean Cognitive Grammar

Why would a speaker go out of her way to minimize the meaning she expresses? There are in fact a number of reasons. Some are generous in nature (e.g. a desire not to give offense or to impose on others' credulity). Others are more selfish (e.g. a desire not to incriminate oneself or to appear foolish). The overriding reason, however, is that the expression of meaning is often an inherently risky affair, and if meaning is risky, minimizing meaning is bound to be attractive.

None of this, as far as I can tell, is particularly controversial in pragmatics, where hedging, mitigation, and indirectness are staples of research. It is nonetheless puzzling, and even paradoxical, from the perspective of semantic representation. If, as I am suggesting here, many constructions make an essentially negative contribution to the significance of an utterance — if they effectively limit what a hearer may infer from an utterance — how is such a contribution to be represented? How can the meaning of a construction consist in an absence of meaning?

The paradox is, I think, more apparent than real, and it stems from a common misconception about the nature of meaning — that meaning can be equated with informativity. I assume, on the contrary, that meaning is not so much a matter of information as one of imagination, and that it has as much to do with the ways conceptual contents are construed as with the truth conditions they impose. In this perspective, the phenomena of understatement and attenuation reflect common strategies speakers use to

frame the content of what they say. On the other hand, figures like these are all about informativity—or more precisely, about its absence. To construe something as attenuating, and *a fortiori* to construe something as an understatement, is to see it as lacking some informational content. In effect, then, understatement and attenuation involve different ways of framing the content of what is said against the background of some informationally stronger content which might have been said, but wasn't.

My goal in this section is to sketch out some basic theoretical machinery to motivate this characterization of the two figures. In doing so I draw liberally from the disparate traditions of cognitive semantics and neo-Gricean pragmatics. While the resulting blend may strike some as incongruous, I think the two traditions may be more compatible than is often assumed. In effect, I propose a compromise between those who would place a clear boundary between semantics and pragmatics, and those who view meaning construction in general as a dynamic process which is in some sense pragmatic from start to finish. The solution is to accept the basic distinction between two kinds of meaning (what is said vs. what is implicated), but to refuse the assumption (common among those who enforce this distinction) that either sort of meaning has any ontological priority over the other. As I will argue below, both sorts of meaning can coexist in the conventional content of a single construction, and both are essential features of ordinary linguistic communication: Neither could exist without the other.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. As a cognitive linguist, I take the grammar of a language to be a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units (Langacker 1987:54), and I take the most basic sort of linguistic unit to be the construction — that is, the arbitrary pairing of some form, or *signifier*, with some semantic/pragmatic content, or *signified* (cf. Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988). On the formal side, a construction may be something as simple as a phonological variable (e.g. a rising tone or a deleted segment) or something as complex and schematic as a productive pattern of verb phrase formation. On the semantic side, a construction is a convention for coordinating joint attention among speakers toward some conceptual content (cf. Croft 2000), and functions pragmatically (if you will) as a schematic prompt for imaginative processes of meaning construction. Meaning, on this view, consists essentially of a profiled content construed against one or more background frames (Fillmore 1982; Langacker 1987), and meaning construction involves the dynamic elaboration of propositional contents in a densely interconnected network of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1997).

Given all this, it is not surprising that many cognitive linguists are skeptical about any easy distinction between semantics and pragmatics. Langacker, for example, suggests the distinction is "largely artifactual" and based on the sort of false dichotomy one should

probably avoid (1987:154). In a usage-based theory of grammar, it makes little sense to draw too sharp a line between meaning and use. Dichotomies oversimplify, but a nice dichotomy can sometimes be quite useful. A good one, I think, is the Gricean distinction between two kinds of non-natural meaning, what is said and what is implicated. In the simplest case, one imagines that speakers might simply say what they mean. But even the plainest speaking has layers of meaning (cf. Haiman 1998). Meaning is inherently complicated, and what is said is just the starting point for a larger interpretive process.

An implicature is a kind of meaning—one which departs in some way from what is literally said. By *literally said*, here, I mean simply whatever propositional content a speaker explicitly commits herself to by saying what she says. Implicatures are propositions which a speaker conveys without such explicit commitment. The notion of "explicit commitment" is probably vexed itself, but in general implicatures can be distinguished from other expressed propositions by at least four properties (Grice 1989:39): they are not conventional; they are non-detachable; they are, in principle, calculable; and they are defeasible, either by suspension or denial (Horn 1972).

I assume, as a sort of gross simplification, that an implicature minimally involves three mental states corresponding to the canonical three steps a hearer must follow to calculate it, which I model here as three mental spaces (cf. Fauconnier 1997): a context, or common ground, in which something is said (C); a focus space (S), featuring the content of what is said; and a secondary, or implicated space (I), which a hearer may infer on the basis of hearing S in C.

Figure 1 depicts the basic process. In this figure, and those which follow, I employ the following conventions. Upper-case letters denote different kinds of mental spaces: C (common ground), S (said), U (unsaid), I (implicated). Spaces in focus are drawn in bold. Lower case letters denote propositions: What is said is a proposition in focus; what is implicated is a proposition out of focus and shown here in parentheses. A solid arrow represents the flow of consciousness from one space to another. A dashed arrow from any space into C denotes the conversational uptake of a proposition into the common ground.

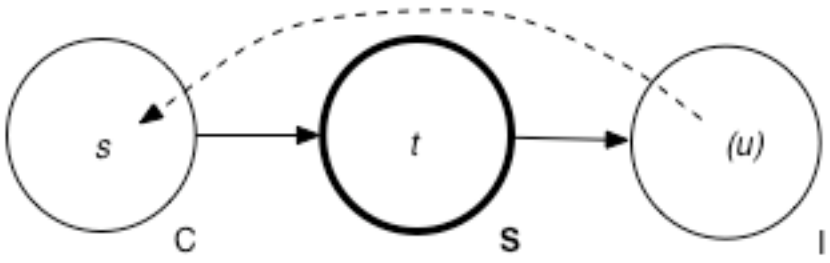

Figure 1: The Implicational Circuit

Implicatures arise when a speaker deliberately exploits a pragmatic principle to lead a hearer to make some inference. In this sense, implicatures are always derived; they can only appear in a subordinate mental space. Implicatures are also unlike ordinary, arbitrary meanings, since they are based on general principles of rational behavior.

In standard neo-Gricean fashion, I distinguish two basic kinds of implicature based on two antithetical principles of pragmatic inference: (i) the Q-Principle, that a speaker should say enough to achieve her communicative goals, and (ii) the R-Principle, that a speaker should say no more than is necessary to achieve her goals (Horn 1984;1989:194).

The Q-principle invites upper-bounding inferences: If a speaker says *p*, and it would have been just as easy to say some stronger *q*, one may infer that *q* is not the case, or that the speaker cannot commit herself to the truth of *q*. Common Q-implicatures include the use of *some* to mean 'some and not all', of *may* to mean 'permitted but not obligated', and of *or* to be interpreted exclusively.

The R-principle invites lower-bounding inferences: If a speaker says *p*, and the context is such that where *p* is true *q* is typically (or stereotypically) true as well, one may infer that *q* is the case. Common R-implicatures include the use of *if* to mean 'if and only if', of *can* to mean 'can and will', of *a N* to mean 'a prototypical N', and more generally "the use of vague expressions as euphemisms for what one would prefer to leave unsaid" (Horn 2004:15).

With these basics behind us, we are now in a position to define the figures of attenuation and understatement in terms of the logical relations holding between propositions in a lattice of mental spaces.

An attenuating expression is one which somehow says less; the question is, less than what? The answer, I suggest, is less than might otherwise have been said. Attenuation in general is a way of framing an expressed proposition, *t,* against the background of a saliently unexpressed proposition, *u,* where it is understood that *u* unilaterally entails *t*. Attenuation differs from mere uninformativeness in that *u* is not just unsaid, but salient in the context as something which could easily have been said. This is depicted diagrammatically in Figure 2, where the straight line linking S and U marks U as a background to the focus space S, and where the context, C, includes the fact that the unsaid proposition *u* is stronger than the focus proposition *t*.

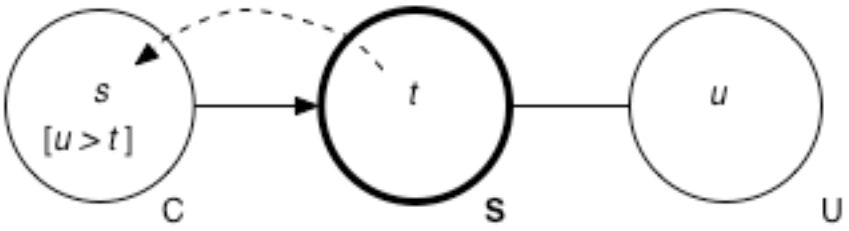

Figure 2: The Attenuation Frame

The difference between attenuation and understatement is a difference between what is said and what is implicated. What is left conspicuously unsaid in one figure is what is implicated in the other. To say that someone is "not a genius" is relatively uninformative, and so counts as attenuating with respect to other more specific ways of characterizing their intelligence; but if by "not a genius" one means 'positively unintelligent', one has shifted from attenuation to understatement. Both figures present a proposition in a scalar frame as contrasting with some stronger alternative, but understatement actually implicates the stronger alternative. Basically, an understatement is just the kind of R-based implicature which can be triggered by the use of an attenuated proposition.

Thus far, I have defined understatement and attenuation as figures of meaning construction. The question now is what role, if any, these figures play in the conventional meanings of ordinary linguistic constructions. The answer I suggest in this and the following section is that both play significant roles with stark grammatical consequences in the realm of polarity sensitivity.

3. Attenuation and Polarity Sensitivity

Polarity sensitivity seems to be one of those phenomena which somehow become more controversial as they come to be better understood. The part of polarity that is perhaps best understood concerns the conditions under which polarity items are licensed. There is now substantial agreement that polarity items are sensitive to the inferential, and particularly logical, properties of the contexts in which they occur (though there remains substantial disagreement over how to characterize those contexts). Given such a consensus it is tempting to consider why such a sensitivity might arise in grammar.

The conventional wisdom these days seems to be that polarity items are inherently emphatic, and that the constraints on negative polarity items (NPIs) stem from their need to appear in contexts where they will be maximally informative. Kadmon & Landman (1993), for instance, in their influential analysis of *any,* suggest that it is “a very prominent characteristic of *any* as well as other NPIs that they make the statement they

are in stronger" (1993: 369, emphasis added). The implication here seems to be that it is a prominent characteristic of *all* other NPIs. The same intuition has motivated a succession of otherwise quite different analyses (Jackson 1994; Krifka 1995; Lahiri 1998; Chierchia 2001; van Rooy 2003; Zepter 2003), which take some notion of informative strength or strengthening as the essence of polarity sensitivity. Zepter puts it succinctly: "The actual licensing condition of NPIs is the requirement to be contained in a particularly strong statement" (2003: 235).

There is, of course, substantial empirical support for this thesis. The English constructions in (1) and (2), for example, are notably strong NPIs and positive polarity items (PPIs), respectively. All of these forms occur only where they are maximally informative, and many are well-known for this property: Horn (1989) provides over a century of references on this point.

(1) *any, the least bit, in the slightest, a living soul, a damn thing, jack, squat, ever, even once, can possibly, can believe, can fathom, have a hope in hell, can make heads or tails of*

(2) *a great many, a bunch of, a ton of, a heap of, piles of, scads of, loads of, the whole deal, the whole shebang, the whole kit and caboodle, the whole nine yards, the whole megillah, the whole ball of wax, the long and the short of it, galore, must, gotta, had better*

On the other hand, there is also quite a bit of empirical support for the opposite thesis. Many polarity items, both NPIs and PPIs, are constrained to appear where they are conspicuously uninformative. The PPIs in (3) and the NPIs in (4) are all attenuators; they are a motley syntactic set, including auxiliaries, determiners, degree modifiers, and idiomatic predicative constructions. What they share, I think, is a certain modesty: They are only appropriate where they weaken the force of the proposition to which they contribute.

(3) *some, somewhat, sort of, kind of, a tad, a mite, a smidgen, a handful, a hint, a couple, one or two, a while, a whiff, a ways, might, may well*

(4) *much, a whole hell of a lot, all that much, all that many, much of a* N, *exactly a* N, *overmuch, all that, any too, so very, be great shakes*

Such constructions have long been known in the literature on positive and negative polarity items. Baker (1970) mentions several attenuating polarity items, including both NPIs and PPIs. And Linebarger (1980), von Bergen & von Bergen (1993), and van der

Wouden (1997) explicitly mention understatement as a defining property of at least some NPIs.

In my own work (Israel 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001, to appear) I have argued that attenuating polarity items are the grammatical mirrors of their emphatic counterparts, and that the pragmatics of emphasis and attenuation in general provide a deep explanation for the grammar of polarity sensitivity. Very quickly, the explanation is that polarity items constitute a special class of scalar operators (cf. Fauconnier 1975; Kay 1997) which prompt the construal of an expressed proposition in the context of a scalar model, and which further constrain the informative value of the expressed proposition with respect to some ordered set of alternative propositions (i.e. a scalar model). This is why polarity items are sensitive to the inferential properties of the contexts they occur in. Items like those in (1) are NPIs because they profile elements at the low end of a scalar ordering, and are conventionally used to express emphatic propositions; items like those in (3) are PPIs because while they too denote low scalar values, they are conventionally used to express weak or attenuated propositions. Because of their conventional meanings, such forms only "make sense" when they are construed against the right sort of scalar background.

The basic claim then is that polarity sensitive constructions as a class divide into four basic types based on the interaction of two very general scalar semantic parameters: informative value, which can be either strong (emphatic) or weak (attenuating), and quantitative value, which can be either low or high in a scalar ordering. The basic scheme can be summarized as follows in Figure 3:

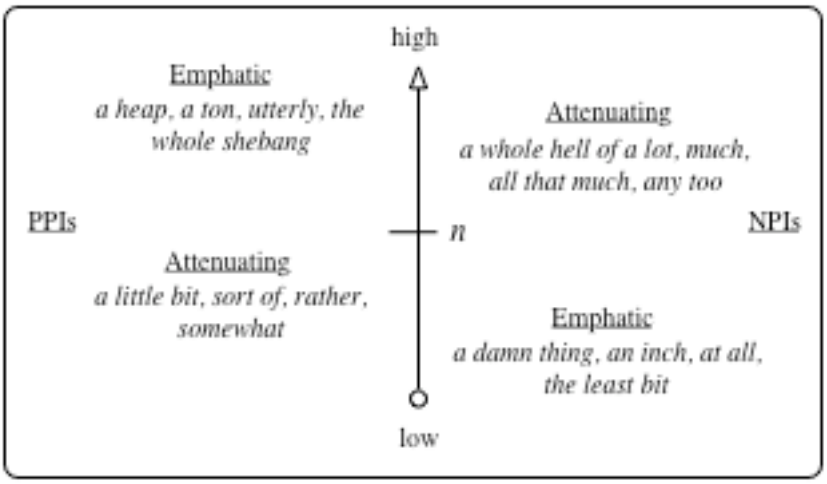

Figure 3: Four Sorts of Polarity Items

Part of the reason why processes of attenuation may sometimes be given short shrift is that work on sensitivity has tended to focus on negative polarity items to the exclusion

of their positive polarity brethren, and it appears that emphatic NPIs are significantly more common, both in English and crosslinguistically, than their attenuating counterparts. Attenuating PPIs are, however, quite widespread, and most of the most frequent PPIs are in fact weak adverbials and determiners (e.g. *some, somewhat, sorta, so-so),* or weakly intensive ones (e.g. *fairly, pretty, rather*; cf. Horn 1989: 402).

One common sort of attenuator is the diminisher (Bolinger 1972), which is essentially the PPI counterpart of the NPI minimizer. A minimizer (e.g. *a wink* in *I didn't sleep a wink)* is an indefinite NP which denotes a minimal measure or degree of some sort, and which conventionally contributes to the expression of an emphatic proposition. A diminisher (e.g., *a bit* in *I could use a bit of sleep)* is an indefinite NP which denotes a small (or smallish) degree of some sort, and which conventionally contributes to the expression of an attenuated proposition.

For a construction to be polarity sensitive, it is not enough for it simply to denote a low quantitative value: it must also conventionally encode a particular informative value. The point is perhaps clearest in some of the English constructions which use the word *bit* as a minimal sort of measure. The phrase *a bit* can be more or less freely used either as a degree modifier or a quantifier in both negative emphatic and positive attenuating contexts. It occurs 17,653 times in the British National Corpus (BNC), mostly in affirmative contexts with a hedging or diminishing function, as in (5).

(5) a. Yeah, cos it looked **a bit** heavy I thought, on top didn't it?
b. 'I'm **a bit** of a disappointment to you,' he said eventually.

Of course, most constructions tend to occur mostly or almost entirely in positive contexts, but *a bit* also occurs 104 times directly following *not,* most often in the elliptical rejoinder *not a bit of it,* but also with a variety of gradable predicates (e.g. *not a bit interested, not a bit nice, not a bit like Plato*).

On its own, *a bit* is therefore not polarity sensitive. But while *a bit* swings both ways between negative emphasis and positive attenuation, in certain constructions it can get stuck at one extreme or the other. Thus the phrase *a wee bit* appears 200 times in the BNC, always in positive contexts with an attenuating (or understating function), as in (6). The phrase *the least bit* occurs 64 times—63 as a negative emphatic, 61 of those having an explicit negation, and once as a positive attenuator (7c).

(6) a. We have been lacking **a wee bit** of professionalism recently.
b. Foreigners can be **a wee bit** difficult about it sometimes.

(7) a. Robbie wasn't feeling the **least bit** humorous.
b. Furthermore she doesn't seem to be **the least bit** worried
c. And you've got **the least bit** too much lipstick.

While many indefinite measure constructions (*a tad, a trifle*, *a touch, a smidgen, a soupçon, a whiff*...) almost never occur under negation, some of the best evidence that a construction really is a PPI can come when it does. For example, where the complex determiner *one or two* is found under negation, the negation is either metalinguistic, as in (8), or else occurs with another scale-reversing construction, like the comparatives in (9), so that its overall effect remains one of weak assertion (i.e. *not more than one or two* = 'relatively few').

(8) Does she agree also that we are talking of not **one or two** people but tens of people?
(9) a. In Universities it was never more than **one or two**.
b. The conductor does not show them how to play, he probably can't play more than **one or two** instruments...

The important point here is that for many constructions at least, attenuation is an inherent and indefeasible feature of their conventional semantic content—one with significant consequences for their grammatical distributions. And in this light, polarity sensitivity may be understood as the grammatical consequence of a fundamentally pragmatic phenomenon. From here, however, things get more complicated.

4. The Dialectics of Negative Understatement

Not all attenuators are created equal. Some do little more than attenuate—they say a little and they mean no more. But attenuators in general always have the potential to do more. Ironically, because attenuators only appear where they minimize what is said, they often give rise to an implicature that a speaker did in fact mean more.

Attenuators do not automatically trigger R-implicatures, but it is in their nature to do so. Consider the attenuating NPI *exactly* + NP, which may weaken a denial by limiting it to the extreme case. The uses in (10) from the BNC are ordinary cases of attenuation:

(10) a. This dog is given a passing significance as… less than a symbol, not **exactly a** metaphor; call it a figure.
b. Yet for most people their MP is not **exactly a** conspicuous person.

In (10b), for example, the denial of true conspicuousness is consistent with most MPs being at least moderately prominent. The uses in (11), however, hint strongly at understatement—that is, the superficially contradictory negations here are prone to interpretation as strong contraries.

(11) a. With the new Conservative Government in 1979, Ken Stowe moved from Downing Street to become Permanent Secretary in the Northern Ireland Office – not **exactly a** rest cure – and in 1981 came back to the DHSS.
b. Patrolling the Ku-damm in the heart of West Berlin isn't **exactly a** hardship.

The move described in (11a) clearly seems to have been not just unrestful, but positively stressful, while the patrolling in (11b) sounds like not just a non-hardship, but actually something of a pleasure. But these implicatures are defeasible, and as (10) suggests they sometimes do not even arise.

This sort of negative understatement involves a sort of R-implicature in which a superficially weak contradictory expression is used to express a stronger contrary meaning—what Horn (1989) calls "contraries in contradictory clothing." In certain contexts implicatures like this have a tendency to become a default inference, so perhaps it is not surprising that a sizable class of superficially attenuating constructions appear to be used only or overwhelmingly in the expression of negative understatements. Consider the constructions in (12), which literally denote an extreme scalar attribute, and which are used in denials to implicate an attribute at the opposite end of the scale.

(12) Conventionally Understating NPI Predicates

VP Construction	Denies	Implicates
be (any) great shakes	'be very good'	'be quite bad'
set the Thames on fire	'be very good'	'be quite bad'
be all X is cracked up to be	'be very good'	'be quite bad'
be the sharpest tool in the shed	'be very competent'	'be incompetent'
be playing with a full deck	'be very competent'	'be incompetent'
bear comment	'be significant'	'be trivial'
grow on trees	'be very common'	'be quite rare'
take kindly to	'esteem'	'disdain'
be skin off one's nose	'be a big problem'	'be no problem'
be the end of the world	'be a big problem'	'be no problem'
be born yesterday	'be very naïve'	'be quite savvy'
be something to sneeze at	'be trivial'	'be significant'
think small beer of	'disdain'	'esteem'

The understating implicatures associated with these constructions appear to be conventional enough that they are not really defeasible. I personally find it difficult to imagine contexts where I could use any of these predicates and felicitously suspend or deny their associated implicatures. And for many of these constructions it is almost impossible to find uses in which the implicature is absent. The effect is that while these constructions are superficially attenuating, in actual usage they are invariably, if indirectly, emphatic.[1]

All of these constructions are strong NPIs: they are licensed in various negative constructions, but not usually in questions, conditional apodoses, or in comparative constructions. These constraints seem to reflect the fact that their associated implicatures only arise in the context a denial of some sort.

It is worth noting that one finds among these constructions both evaluatively positive (e-pos) and evaluatively negative (e-neg) predicates (cf. Horn 1989:353-355). That is, while it would be a good thing to be "great shakes" or to "set the Thames on fire", it clearly is not so desirable to have been "born yesterday," to "think small beer of oneself" or to have lost any "skin off one's nose" — at least not within the commonsense logic of these idioms. On the other hand, while both e-pos and e-neg predicates can be conventionalized as NPI understaters, they may not be equally likely to do so. And it appears that the e-positive NPIs here are the ones in which the understating implicature is most strongly felt and most likely to be conventionalized. Thus, while the inference from "not the brightest bulb" to 'really quite stupid' seems really quite strong, the inference from "not born yesterday" to 'really quite savvy' seems a bit more tenuous. While the former is reliably insulting, the latter seems merely less than complimentary.

Consider the expression *an X to be trifled with*. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the verb *to trifle* as 'to deal with something as if it were of little significance or value.' But normally, someone who is "*not to be trifled with"* is the sort of person one should in fact take very seriously. This construction is relatively uncommon, but highly consistent in its usage. The word *trifled* occurs nine times in the BNC, all nine times in this construction — that is, as a negated passive infinitive followed by *with*. There are no

[1] Ward (1983) discusses a related sort of negative construction he dubs *epitomization,* which features OSV word order, an emphatic rise-fall-rise intonation, and an O (actually, a predicate NP) denoting the epitome of an attribute that is denied of some referentially given topic — e.g. *Einstein he's not* or *the world's greatest singer he's not*. Use of this construction typically comes with an (understating) conversational implicature that the entity under discussion is close to the opposite end of a scale from the epitome, and as Ward notes, it appears that for some speakers this implicature may be fully conventional.

instances of *trifled* as a past tense verb, or of *trifles* as present tense. The examples in (13) are typical.

(13) a. "Well, Croydon and Cooper, you shall see me face to face soon enough and then you will know that Emily Grenfell is not a woman to be **trifled** with."
b. Perhaps the most effective shock tactic is to create the impression that you are a lethal killer yourself, and not to be **trifled** with.
c. Reality is not to be **trifled** with and sliced up in this way.

In all these uses the construction as a whole seems to emphasize the extent to which something should in fact be taken very seriously: An apparent denial of insignificance effectively conveys an emphatic expression of significance. It seems, in fact, that the form is consistently, and perhaps exclusively, used to express threats or warnings. This is apparent even where, as in (14), the construction is used light-heartedly.

(14) The synthesised female voice that responds to your commands and verifies that it has heard them correctly is amiable enough, though clearly not to be **trifled** with.

While a disembodied female voice might not pose much of a threat, the suggestion here is clearly that it commands respect nonetheless.

The nature of R-based inferencing makes the conventionalization of understatement inherently self-defeating: As soon as everyone knows that a given expression regularly means more than it says, it will already be saying more than it used to. Understating constructions are thus subject to the somewhat paradoxical constraint that they can only count as understating so long as their (conventional!) emphatic content is construed as indirect and their original, attenuating meanings remain intact. For example, if the expression *great shakes* did not suggest a desirable quality, its disparaging use under negation would not be felt as an understatement.

What seems to be going on in these cases is a variety of short-circuited implicature, in which the use of particular forms comes to be associated with specific sorts of implicature (cf. Morgan 1978; Horn & Bayer 1984). The process is depicted in Figure 4.

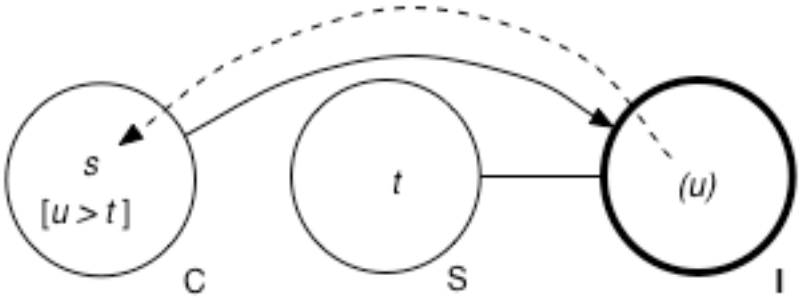

Figure 4: Short-Circuited Understatement

Here attention flows past what is said, S, directly to what is implicated, I. The focused content, *u,* remains implicature-like in that it is calculable from some literal meaning, but that meaning itself, *t*, is reduced to a background proposition. The meaning of a construction which triggers such short-circuiting, however, cannot be reduced to either proposition *t* or *u;* equally important is the way these propositions are accessed in a complex configuration of mental spaces. The meaning is the configuration.

The association of such complex configurations with individual constructions may set the stage for still further levels of complexity. Consider, for example, the predicative use of *big deal* as an understating NPI. Of the 146 instances of this phrase in the BNC, about 70 percent occur under negation, as in (15).

(15) a. He'd been thieving again, of course, but it was **no big deal** really.
b. My parents or family had never made **a big deal** about my body or development.
c. Naively he regarded it as **'no big deal'** and at times he became quite testy at the attention it commanded.

Like many NPIs (Linebarger 1980), *big deal* can be licensed indirectly, by implicature[2]. Thus in (16) the expression is used ironically to mean the contrary of what it literally says. Such uses are common in colloquial exclamations, and are well-represented within the BNC.

(16) a. "**Big deal!**" cried Pickerage, regaining something of his usual Senate page-boy look.

[2] Note that what ultimately licenses the construction is its construal as part of an attenuated proposition—one which is unilaterally entailed by a salient background proposition. The implicature "licenses" the NPI only in that it generates the relevant attenuated proposition in a mental space configuration.

b. Shanti smiled pleasantly at her and seemed happy with this comment, but after the speaker had gone she said to me, "**Big deal!"**
c. **Big deal**: My Career.

In Figure 5, the expressed proposition, *t* (that something is a serious matter), triggers a complex implicature, *~t & u* (that it is not serious and is trivial). The NPI *big deal* is thus licensed by a negative implicature which is itself a sort of understatement, since the implicit contradictory proposition (*~t*) is evoked to convey the stronger contrary proposition (*u*).

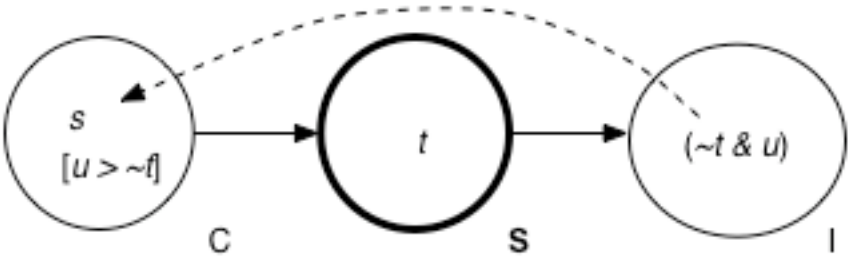

Figure 5: Ironic Implicature

In fact, not even irony is required to license an NPI like *big deal*; a bit of epistemic distance or indirectness can sometimes suffice. The examples below feature *big deal* embedded under the intentional verbs *think* and *feel,* with the evidential qualifier *seem*, and in (17d), with just a hint of a viewpoint other than the speaker's. In all these examples the implicature seems to be that while some may consider it "a big deal", the speaker does not necessarily share this view.

(17) a. That's because parents in Sylhet seem to **think** it is a big deal, a real status symbol to get a Biliti Bor (a bridegroom from England).
b. The extent to which they are **felt to be** a big deal **for the pupils** will mirror the extent to which they are **felt to be** a big deal **by their teachers**.
c. "It always **seemed like** a pretty big deal to me," he said.
d. It's **a generational thing**, a big deal.

Figure 6 illustrates the basic schema for this sort of indirect licensing, in which an expressed proposition in an embedded mental space, T, triggers an appropriate negative implicature in the parent space, S. S here represents, roughly, the speaker's viewpoint, while T represents some other viewpoint from which the speaker dissociates herself. The flow of attention thus goes from C to S to T and, finally, back to S again for the implicature.

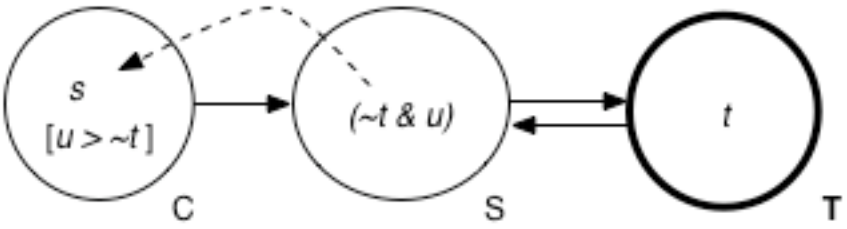

Figure 6: Polarity Licensing by Negative Implicature

All three of these uses—in denial, in irony, and in indirect assertions—involve similar configurations and support similar sorts of implicature. In all of them what is conveyed, whether or not it is said, is that something is both 'not a big deal' (*~t*) and is really rather trivial (*u*). What seems to be essential here is thus a sort of built-in indirection. It is not just the implicature which has become conventional here; it is, more precisely, the path to the implicature through a particular mental space configuration.

5. R-Implicature in Children's Narratives

There has recently been a flurry of research on how young children understand (Q-based) scalar implicatures, and the basic finding is apparently not all that well. It seems that children are often insensitive to pragmatic infelicities which arise when a speaker says conspicuously less than she easily and truthfully could.

The finding goes back to Smith (1980), who reported that children often treat *some* as being compatible with 'all', answering *yes* to questions like "do some elephants have trunks?" even when they clearly understand that all elephants have trunks. The phenomenon has now been replicated for a variety of constructions in English, French, and Greek. Noveck (2001), for example, finds seven- to nine-year-old children are more likely than adults to accept a weak modal like *might* or a weak quantifier like *some* (actually, French *certains*) where their stronger counterparts *must* or *all* would have been equally truthful and more informative. Similarly, Gualmini et al. (2001) report that preschool children, unlike adults, will often accept sentences like *every astronaut took a banana or an apple* in contexts where it is evident that every astronaut in fact took both a banana and an apple. Finally, Papafragou & Musolino (2003) report that Greek-speaking five-year-olds, unlike adults, tend not to compute scalar implicatures from the use of words for 'some' (*meriki*), 'start' (*arxizo*) and 'begin' (*ksekino*) (i.e. they accept sentences like *Daisy started to paint the star* in contexts where Daisy has in fact finished

painting it). On the other hand, these researchers also found that children did usually (though not as frequently as adults) compute scalar implicatures for the quantifier 'half' (*miso*), largely rejecting sentences like *Daisy painted half the star* in contexts where she has painted the whole thing.

Children, it seems, tend not to mind, or simply not to notice, when speakers are less than fully informative. There are several reasons why this might be. Gualmini et al. (2001) report that when children are given an explicit choice between two sentences, one with *and* and one with *or,* they do choose the stronger version as the better way to describe the stronger situation. They conclude that children do understand the relative strength of statements with *and* and *or,* but have trouble constructing the relevant scales on-line, and so fail to calculate the upper-bounding implicature associated with exclusive *or*. On the other hand, Papafragou and Musolino (2003) show that children are also significantly more likely to recognize scalar implicatures when it is made clear to them (either by aspects of the context or by training) that their task is to detect pragmatic infelicity rather than simply to judge the truth of a statement. They conclude that "children's ability to derive scalar implicatures is affected by their awareness of the goal of the task" (2003:254): Children might not notice scalar implicatures simply because, for whatever reason, they do not perceive them as relevant.

While both of these conclusions are probably warranted, there is, I think, another reason why children might fail to calculate upper-bounding, Q-implicatures from the unmarked assertion of weak scalar expressions—because children generally may prefer to use such expressions to convey the opposite, lower-bounding R-implicatures. Not that children younger than 4 are rarely capable of understatement *per se*, but they are often happy to use language which is less than fully explicit, and to rely on their audience to figure out what they mean. Consider, for example, the ways Abe uses the weak scalar terms *something* and *start* in the following story.

(18) Abe's Story, age 2;11; 10 (from the CHILDES Database, MacWhinney 1995)

*ABE: this is a daddy bear.
*MOT: that's a daddy bear now?
*ABE: yeah and [/] and the mother bear said <let's get a baby bear> ["].
*MOT: oh.
*ABE: and they started looking pretty soon they started [//] they saw something.
*MOT: what did they see?
*ABE: a river and pretty soon something crawled out # uh [//] pretty soon something started coming out the river.
*MOT: and what was that something?

*ABE: a whale.
*MOT: a whale came out of the river?
*ABE: and it was big it had a big tail and the whale said to the bears # <I'm a nice whale we didn't have xxx river > ["].
*MOT: oh was the bear real friendly too?
*ABE: yeah and # and they doed@n something # uh # they started cooking something.
*MOT: what were they cooking?
*ABE: a snake.
*MOT: a snake?
*ABE: yeah.
*MOT: did the whale like it too?
*ABE: yeah the whale said <it's pretty good, let's eat> ["] and then they cut it up it was a long snake.
*ABE: um # a mother bear # uh # pretty soon [//] and pretty soon another something started coming out the river.
*MOT: what was the other something?
*ABE: a walrus and he was friendly and then pretty soon something started coming out the river again.
*MOT: what was the other something?
*ABE: uh # uh # a bear goed@n in the river # then coming out.
*MOT: oh a bear went in and a bear came out.
*ABE: yeah and he was hungry.

Abe uses the weak indefinite *something* here to introduce new referents, without in any way suggesting that he doesn't know more specifically what the referent is. And he uses *start* to refer to processes — both activities ('looking for') and accomplishments ('come out', 'cook'), which are clearly understood as continuing to completion. As the examples below suggest, such uses appear to be the norm for Abe at this age.

(19) Abe's Use of *start* in Narrative

2;11.30 you know when I sleeped Rufus started to barked too loud and then I waked up .
3;0.16 when you and Mommy start to go to sleep # you come to my bedroom where I'm sleeping and then go to sleep.
3;0.25 a long time ago I saw # I heard # I said <Mom # look at # look at our cactus> ["] and her did and then it started to die yeah.
3;2.1 when we started to go to Ninny@f and Bumpa's@f house in the car [#] we went someplace that had a lot of flags .
3;3.18 and so the dinosaur got some meat [=! makes chewing sounds] that's how he chewed and [/] and he started chewing that and chewing and chewing and he got so hungry [#] he started jumping up and down up and down up and down up and down up and down .

There are, of course, good rhetorical reasons why Abe, or any storyteller, might want to introduce elements into a narrative a little at a time. The pleasure of a story is, after all, not so much in knowing what happens, as in the process of imaginatively experiencing its happening. The use of relatively uninformative expressions allows a narrative to build incrementally, and thereby to draw out the pleasure of its telling. And usefully enough, it also affords the storyteller time to make up specifics as he goes along.

Whether or not Abe can be credited with any deliberate rhetorical motives for his usage, its effectiveness depends on an assumption that hearers will sometimes not draw an upper-bounding scalar inference from the use of a weak scalar term. This suggests that one reason children might have difficulty recognizing scalar implicatures, as the experimental literature suggests that they do, is that the lower-bounding principle that one should say as much as one can is not one that they use. For children, at least, saying less and meaning more is actually easier than just saying what one means.

6. One More Word

There is more to meaning than informativity. There are also things like rhythm, flow, and intersubjective affect. It often works to the advantage of a speaker not to commit herself to saying too much. And at the very least it allows a way of punctuating our moments of emphasis and exhilaration.

Emphasis and attenuation are figures of meaning, built on an elementary scalar logic yet ultimately serving a host of affective and interpersonal purposes. The logic here may be subservient to rhetoric, but the rhetoric is no less logical for all that. The real question is not whether (logical) semantics and (rhetorical) pragmatics should be distinguished, but how they actually fit together. The phenomenon of meaning construction is big enough to accommodate both.

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