Radial Structure[1] of *Some*

by
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Abstract

Traditional dictionaries provide various senses of the quantifier *some,* but do not show their interconnection. Linguistic studies in the past give detailed analyses of the word, but do not seem to grasp a cognitive picture of its semantic whole. The aim of this study is to demonstrate how the senses of this quantifier are radially structured. It is assumed that the core sense of *some* is "not a few/little or not many/much, but an unspecified number or amount between them; the number/amount that *some* refers to is sometimes *fairly* large and sometimes *fairly* small depending on the context." It is argued that from this core sense other senses are extended.

Key Words:　some, radial, core, unspecificity, understatement

1.0 Introduction

An English word *some* is a basic word. It is clearly a polysemous word, but its internal polysemous structure does not seem to be sufficiently studied. Dictionaries offer many senses of *some,* but they do not show their inter-connectedness. Meanwhile, linguistic studies of *some* are too much devoted to researching features involved in analyzing the word. As a result, they seem to overlook the essential meaning of the word needed when we understand and use it.

The present paper claims that *some* has a core meaning and its various senses are extended from it. The paper will attempt to demonstrate how this claim is supportable from a cognitive view-point.

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2.0 Description of *some* in dictionaries and former studies

2.1 How dictionaries describe *some*?

Regular English Japanese dictionaries and English English dictionaries have been examined concerning how the senses of *some* are handled. English Japanese dictionaries examined are The New Global English-Japanese Dictionary (Sanseido, 1994), College Lighthouse English-Japanese Dictionary (Kenkyusha, 1995), Genius English-Japanese Dictionary Revised Edition (Taishukan, 1993), New Proceed English-Japanese Dictionary (Benesse Corporation, 1994), E-Gate English-Japanese Dictionary (Benesse Corporation, 2003), and English-Japanese Dictionary For The General Reader (Kenkyusha, 1999). English English dictionaries examined are Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 5th Ed. (Kaitakusha, 1999), Webster's Dictionary of American English (Random House, 1997), COBUILD Revised New Edition (Kirihara, 1995), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 3rd New Edition (Kirihara, 2003), and Cambridge International Dictionary of English (Cambridge, 1995).

These dictionaries show quite a commonality in describing the meaning of *some*, with two exceptions, which will be touched on later. The common characteristics are found in the way the senses of *some* are classified and the order in which those classified senses are presented. There is, however, some small non-significant variation in the presenting order. The following are the common characteristics:

1) /səm/ (Used with a plural count noun or a mass noun.)

    a) In affirmative sentences:

        An unspecified number/amount of ~; a few/little ~

        E.g. **Some** *children were playing in the park*. (OALD); *There's* **some** *cake in the kitchen if you'd like it*. (CIDE)

        In non-affirmative sentences, *any* is used, instead of *some*.

        E.g. *Are there* **any** *messages for me?* (E-Gate)

    b) When *some* is used in non-affirmative sentences, positive answers are expected or such sentences indicate suggestions or requests rather than simple questions.

        In interrogative sentences:

        E.g. [General question] *Will you spend* **some** *time with your friends?* (Webster's); *Didn't I make* **some** *comments on it?* (E-Gate); [Suggestion] *I'll be awake, so why don't you get* **some** *sleep.*

(E-Gate); [Request] *Could you give me* **some** *idea of when the building work will finish?* (CIDE)

In conditional sentences:

E.g. *If you have* **some** *money, please lend me some?* (New Proceed)

2) /sʌm/ (Used with a plural count noun or a mass noun.)

A part of the whole set; a number of people or things or an amount of something but not all. Sometimes, it is used together with *others*, and the same *some*.

E.g. **Some** *people remember when they were two years old.* (E-Gate); **Some** *students are very interested in computer, and others not.* (E-Gate)

3) /sʌm/ (Used with a singular count noun.)

A person, thing, place, or time that is unspecified or unknown to the hearer and the speaker

E.g. *Three years ago there was an incident at the local school when* **some** *bloke started shooting the place up.* (COBUILD); *Just give him* **some** *excuse or other.* (LDOCE)

5) /sʌm/a considerable number/amount of ~.

E.g. *I've known her for quite* **some** *years now.* (Webster's)

6) /sʌm/Appreciatory or depreciatory use.

Appreciatory use: e.g. *That's* **some** *achievement – you must be very proud.* (OALD)

Depreciatory use: e.g. **Some** *hotel that turned out to be – it was dreadful.* (CIDE)

7) /sʌm/Approximately; about.

The building was **some** *fifty stories high.* (Webster's)

8) Pronoun

a)[2] Pronominal use for *some* 1): unspecified number or amount.

E.g. *You can eat some of these waffles.* (E-Gate); *People gave plenty of suggestions and we used* **Some** *in the new show.* (LDOCE)

b) /sʌm/The pronominal use for *some* 2): a part of.

E.g. **Some** *may not agree with me.* (E-Gate); *Some students are good at numbers,* **some** *words, and still others pictures.* (E-Gate)

9) Compound noun expressions: *somebody and someone.*

a) An unknown or unspecified person

E.g. *There's* **someone** *outside the house.* (CIDE)

 b) A person of importance or authority

  E.g. *She thinks that she is **somebody**.* (E-Gate)

10) A compound noun expression: *something*

 a) A thing that is unknown or unspecified.

  E.g. *He started to say **something**, but apparently changed his mind.* (E-Gate)

 b) What is considered impressive or notable.

  E.g. *It's **something** to be safe home again.* (Reader's)

One of the two exceptions I have mentioned above is that Webster's Dictionary puts in the first place the sense of "being an unknown, or not specified one," before the other senses. I'm afraid, the word *some* may be too basic for this dictionary to handle very seriously. In fact, the account of this word by the dictionary is the shortest of all the dictionaries I have examined. The other exception is about the stresses: /səm/ and /sʌm/. All the English Japanese dictionaries examined show the relations between the stresses of *some* and its various senses. No English English dictionaries examined, except LDOCE, show such relations.

2.2 How former studies describe *some*?

Three trends seem to be noticed. One is the approach that is not very different from the traditional approach such as the one that most dictionaries have adopted. We have seen this traditional approach in the above section: "How dictionaries describe *some*?". It may be referred to as a traditional lexicographical approach. This kind of traditional approach is not only found in the above dictionary type of materials but also in grammar books and some other studies (e.g., *A Comprehensive Grammar of English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985) and Putseys (1992)).

A second trend is characterized as analyzing *some* by using distinctive features. Two kinds of distinction are made there. First, some features are utilized to make distinctions among the various senses of *some*, and second, others are used to distinguish *some* from a sister word, *any*. Some distinctive features are made use of in both cases. Such a distinctive-feature approach is typically found in studies like Sahlin (1979), Ikeuchi (1985), Hirtle (1988), and Kawase (1989). Sahlin's (1979) study is so detailed that it ends up in using so many features; for example, [Stress], [Singular/Plural], [Article], [Definite], [Selective], [Specific], [Referential], [Particular], [Contrastive], and even [Large Quantity]. In Hirtle (1988), another features like [Actual (Real)]

and [Hypothetical] are introduced. The features like [Actual (Real)] and [Hypothetical] play an important role in making a distinction between *some* and *any*. In Hirtle's analysis of *some*, the features that play the most important roles seem to be [Number] and [Amount]. Those features are combined into the feature [Number/Amount]. In Ikeuchi's (1985) work, [Stress] and [Selective] have important functions in analyzing and describing the senses of *some*. Kawase's (1989) study does not necessarily focus on distinctive features such as the above. However, since the semantic distinction between *some* and *any* is his key research point, the features needed for that distinction are given critical roles. The features given important roles there are [Specificity] and [Referential].

The third trend is a cognitive approach, probably represented by Bolinger (1977). In Bolinger (1977), *some* and *any* are regarded as independent words, and they are neither syntactically nor semantically considered to be suppletive. The meaning of *some* is analyzed independent of that of *any*. As a result, distinctive features like the ones mentioned above are not given much importance there. Of course, this does not mean that no features are involved in the semantic analysis of *some*. Features used as distinctive features in the studies mentioned above play important parts in his analysis, too. For example, such features as [Particular] and [Specific] are treated as key features in the meaning of *some*. Bolinger's (1977) study is cognitively oriented, but the radiality of *some* claimed by this present study is not given any consideration.

3.0 Problems on the description of *some* in dictionaries and former studies

In the traditional dictionaries we have seen above, it is not investigated what relations there are among the various senses of *some*. Particularly, it is not made clear how cognitively related the senses of *some* are. For example, it is not shown what central sense it has and how it is extended to the other senses. In the former studies reviewed above, 'distinctive features' must be important elements for analyzing the word *some* formally. Their usefulness, however, seems to be suspicious when we consider how we grasp the word and how we apply it in a real discourse. In other words, the cognitive aspect of their studies lacks a satisfactory investigation.

4.0 The demonstration of the core approach to the meaning of *some*

First, let's look at common or familiar usage examples of *some*:

(1) *I want **some** apples.*

(2) *There were **some** guests in the hotel lounge.*

(3) *I took **some** medicine since I had a fever.*

(4) *There's **some** milk left in the refrigerator.*

(5) *Many people are inclined to stop smoking for a health reason, but **some** people still smoke.*

(6) ***Some** students are very interested in computer, and others not.* (E-Gate)

(7) ***Some** lucky guy in the world won her love.* (E-Gate)

(8) *I've known her for quite **some** years now.* (Webster's)

(9) *It takes **some** time to get to the center of Tokyo from Narita Airport.*

The following are non-prototypical but still common or familiar usage examples of ***some***:

(10) *Wow, that was **some** dinner!* (CIDE)

(11) ***Some** hotel that turned out to be – it was dreadful.* (CIDE)

(12) *I want to be **somebody** in the future.*

Looking at all those example sentences, it seems to be sound to consider that all the various senses of *some* are connected to each other. *Some* appears to have a polysemous structure. Examples (10), (11) and (12) may show some dissimilarity to the other familiar examples (1) ~ (9). Still, some linkage to the familiar prototypical examples is noticeable.

I assume that the word *some* has the core-based structure; that is, I assumte that it has a central sense and the peripheral senses that are extended from it.

My assumption of the core meaning of *some* is: "not a few/little or not many/much, but an unspecified number or amount between them; the number/amount that *some* refers to is sometimes *fairly* large and sometimes *fairly* small depending on the context." Obviously, pragmatic factors get involved in determining the realized sense of *some* in an actual discourse. Furthermore, the sense of *some* sometimes may not firmly established, but may be quite

ambiguous or vague among its potential two or more senses.

From this core meaning, the following senses are extended.

(A) Simply unspecified number or quantity

Here, *some* means the emphasis on the existence of an entity in question. It does not say, however, that, only if it is 'more than zero,' it will be just as good. In other words, it does not say that it can be close to zero, just like *a few* ~ or *a little* ~, which also means 'more than zero.' *Some* should indicate a higher number or amount than that, i.e., a higher number than *a few* ~ or a higher amount than *a little* ~. The emphasis on 'existence' implies 'a small number/amount of ~.' Here again, 'a small number/amount of ~' indicates a little more than "a few/little~." Recall that the core meaning of *some* is "not a few/little or not many/much, but an unspecified number or amount between them; the number/amount that *some* refers to is sometimes *fairly* large and sometimes *fairly* small depending on the context." When *some* is compared to a *few/little*, there IS *some* difference between them. Compare, for example, the following two sentences; "There is *some* milk left in the refrigerator." and "There is *a little* milk left in the refrigerator." The latter sentence definitely expresses 'a *little* milk"; there is no ambiguity or vagueness. The former one, on the other hand, may indicate a small amount of milk but still ambiguous because the expression *some* is used, not a *little*.

Here, certainly, *some* does not indicate 'a large number of' or 'a large amount of', unlike the quantifiers *many* or *much*.

When *some* is used in non-affirmative sentences, this sense of *some* seems to be highlighted.

Some keeps the sense of being a small number or amount of though more than a few or a little. In this sense, existence is emphasized. If non-existence is implied, or if there is no supposition about existence, *any* will be used.

(13) *"I went back to my hometown last weekend." "Well, so did you spend **some** time with your parents?"*

The first speaker's utterance sets the orientation that he or she spent *some* time with the parents.

(14) *Would you care for **some** coffee?*

Here, the speaker expects that the addressee wants a certain amount of coffee. If there is no such expectation, *any* will be used; "Would you like *any* coffee?"

The movie "Corrina, Corrina" (1994) can give us a very illustrative scene about this sense of *some*. Corrina (Whoopi Goldberg), working as a homemaker, made awfully spicy food for dinner. She asks the family (dad and his daughter) if they want more. But there is only silence there. The conversation goes as follows: "(Does) anyone want *some* more? . . . (Silence) . . . (Does) anyone want *any*?" [Emphases are mine] This utterance very clearly shows the meaning of *some* and *any* and their difference.

(15) *If you have **some** questions, please ask me.*

In (15), the addressee is expected to have questions.

(B) A part of the whole. The size of the part is not specified though it is neither large nor small.

Some does not mean either many or a few as we already have seen. If you want to say 'a few people,' you will say 'a few people.' And, if you want to say 'many people,' you will say 'many people.' Precisely in the same way, *some* does not mean either *much* or *a little* here. (16a) is neither (16b) nor (16c).

(16a) ***Some** people think that traditional Chinese medicine is as effective as Western medicine.*
(16b) ***A few** people think that traditional Chinese medicine is as effective as Western medicine.*
(16c) ***Many** people think that traditional Chinese medicine is as effective as Western medicine.*

(C) A fairly large number/amount of.

(8) *I've known her for quite **some** years now.* (Webster's)
(9) *It takes **some** time to get to the center of Tokyo from Narita Airport.*

Two factors are working here. Both are rhetorical ones. First, *some* in the sense of 'a fairly large

number/amount of ' is used for the purpose of expressing 'not a few' or 'not a little.' The basic sense of *some* is neither a few/little nor many/much (and of course definitely not zero), but an unspecified number/amount between them. Using the quantifier *some* means to deny both the larger end and the smaller end of the quantity. In the sense of (C), the denial of the smaller end of the quantity is strongly intended. This denial is considered to swing the quantity that *some* refers to onto a fairly large quantity. Since *some* is not as large a quantity as *many* or *much*, it does not go that far to refer to such a large quantity; hence, 'a fairly large quantity.' This is indeed a rhetorical expression.

The second factor is 'understatement.' If you say "I've known her for quite **many** years now." it will be straightforward, having no implication at all. That is, it is not very interesting. The intentional use of a vague expression *some* makes the addressee infer that it actually means 'a fairly large number of.' This kind of effect is expected. This effect is a rhetorical one.

The two factors are different, but these different factors are considered to be working together in producing the sense of *some* in question here. Understatement is quite a common rhetoric. It also plays an important role in the sense of *some* in (E) below.

(D) Unknown to the hearer, and also to the speaker; the referred entity is not identified, but exists or has its existence.

The unspecificity of a quantity is extended to the unspecificity of reference or identity. This extension may be characterized as a change in the dimension of quantity-quality, from quantity to quality, while the dimension of unspecificity is unchanged.

(7) ***Some lucky guy in the world won her love.*** (E-Gate)

This extension along the dimension of quantity-quality is probably widespread.

(E) Appreciatory or depreciatory

These two senses are considered to be produced by the two types of extension: 'a change in the dimension of quantity-quality' and 'understatement.' First, just like (D), in the dimension of quantity-quality, the original quantitative sense of *some* is changed to the qualitative dimension, here a dimension of good or bad. Second, 'understatement' takes a neutral *some* toward a greater

degree. When *some* is used in this way, it gives rhetorical effects to the utterance and the hearer. Whether *some* is used as an appreciatory sense or depreciatory sense is determined by pragmatic and contextual factors.

(F) About, approximately

This sense is simply explained by the extension process whereby an 'unspecificity' aspect of *some* gets highlighted.

(G) Pronominal *some*

The senses of the pronominal *some* is explained in the same way as the corresponding usages of the quantifier *some.*

(H) Compound noun expressions: *somebody* and *someone.*

a) An unknown or unspecified person. This sense is accounted in the same way as *some* (D).

b) A person of importance or authority. This sense is explained by 'understatement.' See *some* (E). This usage has a rhetorical import.

(I) Compound noun expression: *something.*

a) A thing that is unknown or unspecified. This sense is accounted in the same way as *some* (D).

b) What is considered impressive or notable. Just like (Hb), the sense is explained by 'understatement.' Again, this usage has a rhetorical thrust.

5.0 Concluding remarks

I believe that it is quite consequential to grasp the senses of *some* as a radial structure. Grasping its meaning in this way deepens its understanding. Furthermore, since it makes its intuitive understanding possible, its learning will be made easier. It is not a proper learning effort to attempt to memorize various senses of *some* separately.

Notes

1. See Lakoff (1987)
2. Actually, this distinction between a) and b) is really confusing.

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