

Existential Sentences and Pragmatics

While we've noted the tradition in Logic of interpreting "some" to mean "at least one," that tradition can look suspect; for it seems in ordinary language we often **don't** mean "at least some" when we say "some". For example: if I say "Some of the students passed the class" when I know that in fact all of them passed, my claim seems misleading or deceptive. And that appearance of deception would be explained immediately if we assumed that "some" means "only some" – for in a case where all the students passed, it would be simply **false** to claim that only some of them did.

But the traditional reading of "some" can be defended even in the face of that last observation, if we recall a point from our earlier discussion of pragmatics: that we can deceive in language not simply by uttering a false sentence, but by deliberately saying less than we know. So if you ask where the remote control is, and I tell you it's "somewhere in the kitchen" even though I know exactly where (in the kitchen) it is, I've misled you without saying anything false. In particular, I've violated Grice's **Maxim of Quantity**: "Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary."

Likewise with existentials: if you ask how many students passed the exam, and I say "some students did" though I know that all of them did, I'm deliberately, and deceptively, withholding relevant information. Since pragmatics here explains this appearance of deception, we don't after all need to assume that "some" means "only some".

