Some somes are quantifiers

Semanticists sometimes make use of arguments based discourse to support or refute a specific semantic analysis. While recognizing the value of discourse-based argumentation, I urge that caution is needed in two respects. First, determining what the “discourse facts” are requires careful attention to empirical evidence. Second, close attention to argumentation is required before we can conclude that some discourse finding must receive a semantic, rather than a pragmatic account. The relevant case examined here is the analysis of scalar quantifiers. The classical analysis of scalar expressions assumes a lower-bound-only semantics for these expressions (e.g. ‘more than 50%, and possibly all’ for most), complemented by a pragmatically derived upper bound (Following Horn, 1972 and onwards). I have challenged this analysis in Ariel (2004), proposing instead a circumbounded analysis for most, where the upper bound too is lexically specified (‘51-99’%). Extending the analysis to some in this paper, I will counter two discourse-based arguments recently made by Horn (2006, 2009) regarding scalar quantifiers. I will argue that Horn’s arguments based on yes versus no in denials of scalars and on the (non)acceptability of almost and barely used in response to quantified propositions in discourse neither refute my circumbounded analysis nor support Horn’s lower-bound analysis. First, my questionnaire results challenge the discourse “facts” that Horn cites. Second, the discourse phenomena in question are shown to be pragmatically motivated, and hence orthogonal to the controversy regarding the lexical analysis of scalar quantifiers.

I will then present new findings and arguments in favor of the circumbounded analysis, and against the classical analysis. I cite examples where a ‘not all’ interpretation is clearly inappropriate and presumably not generated, therefore, but some is still interpreted as upper-bounded. This is puzzling on the classical analysis, but not on the circumbounded analysis, which distinguishes between a lexical upper bound (always present) and an ‘all exclusion’ pragmatic inference (contextually derived, and not very often).