Inferring Comparison Classes from Sentence Structure and Informational Goals

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Gradable Adjectives & Comparison Classes

That Great Dane is big

\[ \text{big for a Great Dane?} \]

\[ \text{big for a dog?} \]

Kennedy (2007)

How do listeners infer the comparison class?

Listeners use world knowledge and pragmatic reasoning to adjust the comparison class (Tessler, Lopez-Brau, & Goodman, 2017)

What a noun can do

A Noun Phrase in the sentence can contribute to reference or predication. (Reboul, 2001)
- reference: aid the listener in attending to the target referent
- predication: set the comparison class

Inferential hypothesis

Reference-predication trade-off

Nouns whose presence can be explained by their utility in reference are less likely to be used for predication (setting the comparison class).

Working Assumption: Nouns in the subject position (esp., when combined with the deictic “that”, e.g., “that dog”) are more likely to contribute to reference, and less to predication.

Inference Design

Comparison Class Inference

Your friend runs far ahead of you. You see him in the distance:

What do you think your friend meant?

Syntax: Subject N, Predicate N
Context: Basic, Subordinate

“It’s big relative to other ___”

Noun Production

You say to your friend: “That ___ is small”

Syntax: Subject N, Predicate N

Comparison Class Inference (n=200)

Comparison Class Inference plot

Syntax Rating (n=80)

Noun Production (n=190)

Results

Direct Modification Pilot (n=32)

Do the experiments yourself! tinyurl.com/yb5ogj5g

References