Probability and processing speed of scalar inferences is context-dependent

Leyla Kursat and Judith Degen
{lakursat, jdegen}@stanford.edu • Stanford University

Method: Gumball Paradigm

Participants (n=800, MTurk) heard the statement:

"You got some of the gumballs"

Participants (n=800, MTurk) heard the statement:

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Exp. 1: Partitive

Exp. 2: Non-partitive

Costly-inference account: literal information is processed before pragmatic information [3-5]  
Prediction: literal responses should always be faster than pragmatic responses, regardless of the contextual information participants are provided with.

Constraint-based accounts: robustness and speed of inference should be modulated by its contextual support [6,7]  
Prediction: the more the context supports the inference, the faster participants should be to provide a pragmatic response and the slower they should be to provide a literal response.

Participants were assigned to one of two groups and read a cover story designed to establish an implicit QUD:

Does the contextual support provided by implicit QUD and a lexical cue (absence of partitive "of") modulate robustness of scalar inferences?

Does the contextual support provided by implicit QUD, a lexical cue (absence of partitive "of") and responder type modulate speed of scalar inferences?

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Exp. 1: Partitive

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Participants were assigned to one of two groups and read a cover story designed to establish an implicit QUD:

All-QUD

Any-QUD

The store worker tells you that his boss has threatened to fire him if the gumball machines stay jammed, and he really needs this job. He cannot see the machines from the register, but he can normally tell if they are working by the machines' statements.  
He asks you to tell him if the statement is right or wrong, so that he will know if a machine is empty and needs to be refilled.

After you hear the statement, you have 4 seconds to notify the store worker, so please make a decision as quickly as possible.

Exp. 2: Non-partitive

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Exp. 1: some of

Exp. 2: some

Exp. 1: any

Exp. 2: any

Exp. 1: all

Exp. 2: all

Response Times

• literal responses faster than pragmatic for literal responders, pragmatic responses faster than literal for pragmatic responders

• literal responses faster under the any-QUD than the all-QUD

References


Discussion

• Identified conditions under which pragmatic responses are provided more quickly than literal responses; evidence against costly inference account

• Replicated previous findings showing that both a QUD that makes the stronger alternative more contextually relevant and the presence of the partitive increase the rate of scalar inferences.

• Doesn’t provide direct evidence for constraint-based account: contextual cues to pragmatic meaning may guide listeners’ overall expectations for likely meanings, which in turn affect how much processing effort must be invested to arrive at a particular response

Experiments, raw data, scripts: https://github.com/leylakursat/QUD_relevance preregistration: https://osf.io/kkh8g (Exp. 1), https://osf.io/49uqm (Exp. 2)