

The psychophysics of referential communication: Discriminability vs informativity

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In this talk, I will present a pragmatic account of referential communication that stands in contrast with traditional accounts in the Gricean tradition by focusing on perceptual discriminability rather than informativity. According to this new account, referential over-specification can result in efficient speaker-hearer coordination, rather than being pragmatically infelicitous. The results of a series of language-production experiments support the view that speakers are efficient when producing redundant size and colour adjectives, doing so more often when modification could facilitate the hearer's search for the referent in the visual display. English speakers also used redundant colour adjectives more often than Spanish speakers, supporting the hypothesis that redundant adjectives are more efficient in prenominal than in postnominal position. Regarding comprehension, a series of cross-linguistic eye tracking studies confirm that redundant modification can facilitate target identification. Finally, I will present a probabilistic model of referential communication and contrastive inferences. Overall, the results of these studies confirm that redundancy helps efficient referential communication.