

The secret lives of adjectives: An information-theoretic perspective on the use of adjectival modification

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Abstract

Contra the Gricean Maxim of Quantity, speakers frequently encode redundant modifiers (most commonly adjectives) in their referring expressions. For instance, they might produce phrases such as “*the blue ball*”, when only one ball is present in the environment. Previous work in (experimental) pragmatics and psycholinguistics has suggested that such informationally redundant utterances hinder listeners’ comprehension as they violate their expectation that speakers generally strive to be succinct. Consequently, referential redundancy has been viewed as the result of production-internal pressures: i.e., speakers might not have the time/resources to exhaustively scan the immediate visual scene for competitors before they start planning and articulating. Other work has, however, provided evidence to the contrary, namely that redundant adjectives may in fact benefit comprehension. Based on this work, a number of recent accounts consider referential redundancy to be efficient for communication and the result of audience-design processes. In this talk, I will present such an efficiency-based account that views referential redundancy in visually-situated communication as a bounded-rational behaviour. I will argue that information-theoretic notions such as entropy can be utilised to quantify the impact of referential redundancy on processing and allow us to make specific predictions regarding the use of redundant adjectives. I will present empirical evidence from a series of comprehension and production experiments in support of this account.