Title: Referential expressions in context: Object naming and category selection based on contextual constraints

Abstract:

It is common knowledge among linguists that referring expressions are highly context dependent. That is, the term used to refer to an item in a scene is determined partly by the other objects present in this scene. In line with this, the current study demonstrates that category names can be blocked if a competitor object of the same category as the target object is shown in the display. In this case speakers choose a more specific subcategory to refer to the target object. By contrast, having only distractors in the display which do not share the same (super-) category as the target does not lead to blocking of a category and speakers are thus less constrained in their choosing of an appropriate referring expression. In this event, short referential expressions are preferred over long ones and more frequent category names are preferred over less frequent ones.