Syntactic and Referential Cues to the Identification of Generic Statements

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Abstract

Generic sentences (e.g. "Birds fly.") express generalizations about kinds, as opposed to non-generic sentences that are about specific individuals or groups of individuals (e.g. "All birds fly."). We investigate how language users use morphosyntactic and pragmatic cues to determine whether naturalistic sentences should receive generic interpretations. Experiment 1 demonstrates the effect of morphosyntactic features of a sentence's subject noun phrase (NP) on generic interpretation. Experiments 2 and 3 reveal that when a sentence's subject NP does not have an obvious reference in context, the sentence is more likely to receive a generic interpretation.

Keywords: pragmatics; generics

Introduction

Generic sentences differ from non-generic sentences in that they express generalizations about kinds rather than properties of specific individuals or sets of individuals. For example, the sentence "Birds fly" express a general property of the kind *bird*, whereas the sentence "All birds fly" states that for any individual x such that x is a bird, x flies. A key difference between generic and non-generic statements is that generics allow for exceptions. "Birds fly" is true despite the fact that some birds do not fly. "All birds fly" is false in virtue of the fact that there are individuals that are birds and do not fly.

We can identify two distinct puzzles that generics pose for the study of natural language semantics and pragmatics. The first is how to provide adequate truth conditions for generic sentences. These truth conditions must account for the fact that generics allow for exceptions and other peculiarities, such as the fact that generics may be judged true even when the generalization does not hold for most members of the kind. A second puzzle is how language users solve the problem of identifying whether a sentence should receive a generic or non-generic interpretation. This problem arises because individual sentences are often ambiguous between generic and non-generic interpretations. The current study is concerned with the second of these puzzles.

Experiment 1

First level headings should be in 12 point, initial caps, bold and centered. Leave one line space above the heading and 1/4 line space below the heading.

Method

Participants

Stimuli

Procedure

Data Analysis

Results & Discussion

Experiment 2

First level headings should be in 12 point, initial caps, bold and centered. Leave one line space above the heading and 1/4 line space below the heading.

Method

Participants

Stimuli

Procedure

Data Analysis

Results & Discussion

Experiment 3

First level headings should be in 12 point, initial caps, bold and centered. Leave one line space above the heading and 1/4 line space below the heading.

Method

Participants

Stimuli

Procedure

Data Analysis

Results & Discussion

General Discussion

Use standard APA citation format. Citations within the text should include the author's last name and year. If the authors' names are included in the sentence, place only the year in parentheses, as in Newell and Simon (1972), but otherwise place the entire reference in parentheses with the authors and year separated by a comma (Newell & Simon, 1972). List multiple references alphabetically and separate them by semicolons (Chalnick & Billman, 1988; Newell & Simon, 1972). Use the "et al." construction only after listing all the authors to a publication in an earlier reference and for citations with four or more authors.

Footnotes

Indicate footnotes with a number[1] in the text. Place the footnotes in 9 point type at the bottom of the column on which

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[1] Sample of the first footnote.

they appear. Precede the footnote block with a horizontal rule.[2]

Tables

Number tables consecutively. Place the table number and title (in 10 point) above the table with one line space above the caption and one line space below it, as in Table 1. You may float tables to the top or bottom of a column, or set wide tables across both columns.

Table 1: Sample table title.

Error type	Example
Take smaller	63 - 44 = 21
Always borrow	96 - 42 = 34
0 - N = N	70 - 47 = 37
0 - N = 0	70 - 47 = 30

Figures

All artwork must be very dark for purposes of reproduction and should not be hand drawn. Number figures sequentially, placing the figure number and caption, in 10 point, after the figure with one line space above the caption and one line space below it, as in Figure 1. If necessary, leave extra white space at the bottom of the page to avoid splitting the figure and figure caption. You may float figures to the top or bottom of a column, or set wide figures across both columns.

CoGNiTiVe ScIeNcE

Figure 1: This is a figure.

Acknowledgments

Place acknowledgments (including funding information) in a section at the end of the paper.

References Instructions

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[2]Sample of the second footnote.

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