

Integrating social information into pragmatic reasoning in real time

Andrea Beltrama, Florian Schwarz and Joyce He
University of Pennsylvania¹

Pragmatic reasoning has been found to be shaped by different sources of social information (e.g. 3; 8; 7; 5; 6) – including the *persona* embodied by a speaker. In particular, (2) show that comprehenders adopt less precise interpretations of numerals (e.g., “\$200” as “\$190-210”) for a **Chill** speaker, socially expected to speak loosely, than a **Nerdy** one, socially expected to speak precisely. These findings raise the question of how social information is integrated in pragmatic reasoning in real time, and specifically whether (**Hyp.A**) social considerations come into play at later stages of the interpretation process; or (**Hyp.B**) they are integrated from the start.

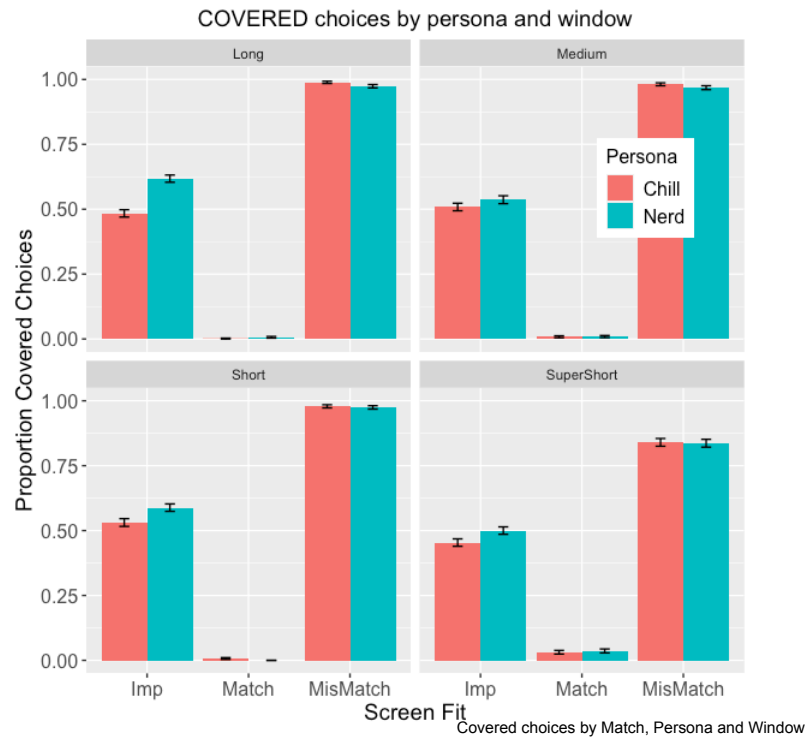
Adapting (2)’s task, we presented dialogues – visually represented as a cartoon – with one character asking a question (‘How much is the flight?’) and the other responding with a numeral utterance (‘It’s \$200.’) after checking their phone. The characters either embodied a **Nerdy** or **Chill** persona (independently normed; manipulated between-subjects). Participants had to indicate which of two phones the answer was based on: one displayed a number (visible screen); and one was shown face-down (covered screen). Participants were instructed to select the visible screen if they thought the speaker was getting their information from this one; and the covered screen otherwise. Two further factors were manipulated. **Match** manipulated how closely the number on the visible phone matched the utterance, with 3 levels: 2 control levels, *Match* (identical) and *Mismatch* (far-off values); and the critical *Imprecise* level, displaying numbers slightly diverging from the uttered one (5-19%). Visible screen selections in the Imprecise condition indicate an imprecise interpretation; Covered screen selections a more precise one. Finally, **Time-Window** varied how long participants had to respond before the trial was aborted, with 4 levels (between-subjects): *SuperShort* (1250 ms); *Short* (2000 ms); *Medium* (2750 ms); *Long* (3500 ms).

24 items were presented in a latin square design – 6 in *Match* and *Mismatch*, and 12 in *Imprecise*, +24 fillers. 768 participants were recruited on Prolific (96 per Persona/Time-Window combination), paid \$2.

As shown in Fig.1, covered choices for *Match/Mismatch* are at floor/ceiling as early as the Short window, but show degraded effects in the SuperShort one, suggesting that time-pressure in the latter made picture selection challenging even at the most basic level. We fit a ME logistic regression with random effects for Items/Participants on covered choice rates (excluding the SuperShort window due to lower accuracy in controls) and Persona, Match, Window and their interaction as predictors. We found a main effect of Match ($\beta=0.62$, $p<.0001$), reflecting a stepwise decrease from Mismatch to Imprecise and Match; and Persona ($\beta=0.26$, $p<.0001$), with higher rates for Nerdy speakers. But the Persona effect was dominated by interactions with Match and Window. Planned comparisons revealed a Persona effect in Imprecise ($p<0.0001$) but not in Match/Mismatch ($ps>0.4$); and – crucially for present purposes – the effect was significant in the Long window ($p<0.05$), but not in the shorter ones ($ps>0.7$).

Our findings support **Hyp.A**: information about speaker identities does not affect interpretation in shorter response time windows. This indicates that comprehenders attend to and integrate descriptive linguistic meaning and social meaning in distinct stages, suggesting a stage of combining these two streams of information in processing. Thus, while social information is crucial for resolving meaning, it is dealt with separately from other interpretive cues. These results open a novel perspective on how the sociolinguistic and descriptive dimensions of meaning interact, a growing topic in pragmatics (see also (4; 1)).

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