

Manipulating context: methods and measures

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The study of pragmatics examines the mechanisms underlying speakers' ability to construct meaning in context and hearers' ability to infer meaning beyond what a speaker has explicitly said. These abilities are taken to depend both on the properties of what is said as well as on considerations of what isn't said. In this talk, I discuss the context of alternatives as knowledge that is brought to bear on pragmatic inference. I ask how one pragmatic phenomenon, referential communication, is influenced by properties of competing forms. I then suggest that while the context of alternatives influences *how* speakers refer, there are other coherence-driven cues that influence *who* speakers refer to and *where* listeners expect a discourse to go as a conversation unfolds. The data is discussed with an eye to methodological choices and challenges. The goal is to develop an understanding of context that moves beyond the ad hoc stipulation of circumstances that may alter interpretation, highlighting instead the opportunities to manipulate and measure context in systematic ways.