Speakers are not maximally rational when choosing referring expressions
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The goal of using a referring expression is for the addressee to pick out the entity intended by the speaker. Thus, it seems reasonable that speakers should choose referring expressions based on the consideration of referential success. Indeed, speakers have generally been shown to consider what the addressee knows when tailoring referential forms.

Here we discuss two cases that show the limits of this consideration; both cases involve situations where the speaker sees more objects than their addressee. We model the experimental results using the multiple-perspectives model (Mozuraitis et al., 2018).

First, Wardlow Lane and Ferreira (2008, Exp. 1) examined reference in two situations: only mutually-visible objects could be referred to (“3”), or all four objects were potential referent (“4”), including an object not visible to the addressee. Modelling results reveal that, in the first round, speakers in “3” generally ignored the hidden object in choosing how to label objects, whereas speakers in “4” did not. In the second round, participants switched roles, and also condition. Here the difference between the situations disappeared, and speakers in both situations ignored the hidden object. Why would speakers in “4” ignore the hidden object, a behavior that can lead the addressee not to be able to choose it as the referent? We propose that those speakers are guided by their earlier experience as addressee in “3”. This is despite the fact that this experience is no longer relevant, because the set of referents has now changed.

Second, Vanlangendonck et al. (2016) examined two different situations: where the knowledge mismatch is such that information from the speaker’s perspective would threaten referential success, and where doing so would only lead to the inclusion of unnecessary information. Experimental results showed that in both cases speakers adapted to the addressee, but not fully. Interestingly, even with the more fine-grained modelling, there is no evidence that speakers adapt to their addressee more when not doing so can lead to referential failure.

These modelling results point to the (surprising) conclusion that speakers do not choose referring expressions based on a case-by-case consideration of whether the referring expressions used would allow the addressee to identify the correct object. We thus demonstrate that speakers are not maximally rational in tailoring referential forms. Instead, we propose that speakers are guided by more general consideration of situational cues.

References