Speaker-external versus speaker-internal forces on utterance form: Do cognitive demands override threats to referential success?
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Speakers’ productions are influenced by communicative and cognitive pressures. Sometimes these speaker-external (communicative) and speaker-internal (cognitive) pressures work to opposite ends: Speaker-external pressures may dictate that speakers tailor utterances for addressees, whereas speaker-internal pressures can make tailoring utterances difficult. One way to tailor utterances is that speakers should avoid references to information that only they know (i.e., privileged information; Stalnaker, 1978). To what extent do speaker-internal cognitive pressures influence the degree to which speakers adhere to speaker-external communicative pressure to avoid references to privileged information?

In four experiments, naïve speakers and addressees viewed an array of four objects. One object was occluded from addressees, making up speakers’ privileged ground. Speakers identified targets for addressees. On test trials, targets had size-contrasting privileged pair mates. On control trials, the same targets were unique. Greater use of modifiers on test over control trials measures references to privileged information.

Experiment 1 assessed these test and control trials in two conditions. In the name-privileged condition, on some filler trials, speakers described the privileged object. In the ignore-privileged condition, speakers never described a privileged object. Making speakers sometimes name the privileged object has two effects: First, it creates a speaker-external pressure to avoid referring to the privileged information on (other) test trials. If speakers name a common-ground heart smaller heart because they can see a privileged larger heart, then addressees cannot know whether smaller heart refers to the common-ground heart or to the privileged object – but only if privileged objects are sometimes named. Second, it draws attention to the privileged objects, because speakers know they sometimes have to name them. The question is, which pressure raised in the name-privileged condition wins – the speaker-external pressure to avoid referring to privileged objects or the speaker-internal pressure that draws attention to privileged objects? Results showed that in the name-privileged condition, speakers referred to privileged information on test trials much more often than in the ignore-privileged condition. Thus, speaker-internal pressure wins: Drawing attention to privileged ground compels references to privileged ground, even though it is in this circumstance where privileged-ground references can confuse addressees. Experiment 2 showed that this pattern did not arise because speakers were confused about the task.

In Experiment 3 we directly tested whether increased attention to privileged objects caused increased references to those objects. Test and control trials were assessed under low salience conditions, where an experimenter indicated targets by pointing to them, or in high salience conditions, where speakers recognized targets through instructions of the sort, “1 to the right of,” next to a reference object in the display. On all test trials, the reference object was the privileged object. Results showed more references to privileged information on high-salience than low-salience trials. Lastly, Experiment 4 combined the attention manipulations of Experiments 1 and 3, and revealed them to not be independent. This suggests that the mechanisms responsible for references to privileged information in all experiments likely arose from the same mechanism. Overall, speakers appear particularly sensitive to speaker-internal pressures when designing their utterances.

References: