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THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

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16:15-17:45

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Navigating imprecision: how comprehenders integrate social information in pragmatic reasoning

Pragmatic reasoning has been shown to be shaped by different sources of social information -- e.g., politeness considerations (Bonneton et al. 2009, Yoon et al. 2020, Mazzarella et al. 2018); affect (Bergen 2016); speaker-specific properties (Fairchild 2018; Mahler 2022), group membership (Kuperwasser et al. 2022). In this talk, I take this line of work further by asking two interrelated questions. First, how does the persona that a speaker embodies shape different dimensions of meaning interpretation? Second, what is the time-course with which persona-based information is integrated in pragmatic reasoning?

In the first part of the talk, I'll present evidence that comprehenders interpret round numbers (e.g., \$200) more precisely (Exp 1) – i.e., as referring to a more narrow range of values – when these are uttered by Nerdy characters, a type of speaker who is expected to describe things more precisely – as opposed to Chill ones – a type of speaker who is expected to describe things less precisely. In contrast, comprehenders judge imprecise descriptions uttered by Nerdy characters as correct more often than imprecise descriptions uttered by Chill speakers (Exp 2). These results suggest that persona-based information affects two distinct levels of utterance interpretation: the computation of the circumstances that a description can be taken to represent; and the calibration of the degree of epistemic authority granted to someone who is potentially misrepresenting the relevant facts.

In the second part of the talk, I present experimental findings suggesting that social considerations emerge relatively late in the interpretation process. Evidence from a timed picture selection task (Exp 3) suggests that when comprehenders are under time pressure to respond (<2000 ms) they hardly incorporate information about the speaker in their response; only in longer time windows the effects of social information become detectable. This indicates that comprehenders attend to and integrate descriptive linguistic and social information in distinct stages, suggesting that, though crucial for resolving meaning, sociolinguistic information is dealt with separately from other interpretive cues.

Taken together, these results open a novel perspective on how the social and descriptive dimensions of meaning interact, furthering our understanding of a growing topic in formal and experimental pragmatics, and highlighting the need to continue investigating the role of sociolinguistic information in pragmatic reasoning.

Click [here](#) to see the colloquium program.