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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 48(0)

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Publication Date

2026

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Peer reviewed

Valence is more prominent than truth-conditional meaning

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Abstract

Valence, the positive/pleasant or negative/unpleasant value of information, grounds our experience with the world. What specific role does valence play in constructing meaning? Some have downplayed it, centering the referential relationship between words and the world, “truth-conditions”. Others have taken valence to be central to meaning. Empirically, the jury is still out. Yet, few have examined how these two types of information compete for prominence within the same word (the Valence Prominence Hypothesis, that valence usually wins). In a first set of studies, we find that valence is significantly faster than truth-conditional categorization. In the second set of studies, we find that valence and not truth-conditional similarity drive judgments. Further, we tested valence against 4 different informational domains fundamental to development and cognition. Animacy stood out as the domain which most closely parallels Valence in its prominence, suggesting a link between meaning and cognitive fundamentality.