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Real-time processing of COVID-19 health messages: Talking about you, us and people

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Abstract

We used COVID-related health messages to investigate the real-time processing of indexical and generic expressions ('you,' 'we,' 'people'), to further our understanding of how these expressions are processed and to explore whether the ease of comprehending public health messages related to the COVID pandemic (as measured by reading time) is influenced by type of referring expression. Results from a self-paced reading study point to an increased processing load in messages with the non-indexical form 'people' (relative to 'we' and 'you'), which we suggest is separable from effects of word length and frequency. We interpret this as initial support for the Indexicality Hypothesis, which posits that expressions which can be indexical are easier to process than non-indexicals. To interpret the expression 'people,' an additional representation needs to be evoked, which does not 'come for free' as part of the speech situation, unlike the speaker and addressee referents of indexical pronouns.