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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

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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

How Expertise and Prior Expectations Impact Interpretations of Generalizations

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Abstract

Past research has identified an asymmetry between how experts and novices interpret generalizations: novices tend to interpret generalizations more broadly. It remains unclear how or when differences in prior knowledge would create such asymmetries. We first investigate whether differences in experts' and novices' domain-level prior knowledge can explain the asymmetry. We find no consistent difference in their domain-level prior knowledge, but we do find a previously unidentified asymmetry in how low- and high-level experts interpret generalizations. We then investigate whether differences in the specificity of experts' and novices' prior knowledge can explain the asymmetry. We find that only listeners with specific prior knowledge vary their interpretations based on context, but differences in specificity do not create an asymmetry. Finally, we discuss the progression from novice to expert and consider remaining explanations for why experts and novices would interpret generalizations differently.