Scalar Inference, Fast and Slow

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Abstract

Recent work on "scalar diversity" has shown that scalar inferences (SIs) do not form a unified class. For example, while <*pretty*, *beautiful*> and <*some*, *all*> both form scales, hearers overwhelmingly interpret some as meaning *not all*, but rarely interpret *pretty* as meaning *not beautiful*. We show that SIs are correspondingly heterogeneous with respect to processing times and their sensitivity to world knowledge. In particular, hearers process SIs associated with closed class scales faster than open-class SIs or ad-hoc SIs; moreover, open-class SIs exhibit greater sensitivity to world-knowledge than their closed-class counterparts. These results, we argue, suggest the existence of at least two distinct paths for generating scalar inferences–one path is fast, automatic, and insensitive to the conversational context, while the other path is slow, deliberate, and sensitive to conversational context.

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