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Exploring the Role of Pragmatic Reasoning in Linguistic Framing Effects

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Abstract

Myriad linguistic cues, subtle and otherwise, have been shown to shape thinking and reasoning. Such linguistic framing effects are attributed variously to irrational biases, affective processes, and analogy. Across two studies, we explored pragmatic reasoning (PR) as a potential unifying mechanism underlying disparate framing effects. In Study 1, we adapted a measure of PR used in attribute framing research, assessing the ability to infer information subtly communicated by a speaker's choice of frame. Our measure captured individual differences in PR distinct from cognitive reflection and mentalizing ability. In Study 2, PR predicted the effect of identity labels on attitudes towards illegal immigration, but not other framing effects. Two such effects were driven, however, by participants' explicit recognition of the influence of the framing language. These results suggest that framing effects may indeed be mediated by PR, but that our measure of PR does not fully capture its mediating role.