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Interpretation of Generic Language is Dependent on Listener's Background Knowledge

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Abstract

Generic statements, like "birds lay eggs" or "dogs bark" are simple and ubiquitous in naturally produced speech. However, the inherent vagueness of generics makes their interpretation highly context-dependent. Building on work by Tessler & Goodman (in press) showing that generics can be thought of as inherently relative (i.e. more birds lay eggs than you would expect), we explore the consequences of different implied comparison categories on the interpretation of novel generics. In Experiments 1 and 2, we manipulated the set of categories salient to a listener by directly providing them the comparison sets. In Experiments 3 and 4, we collected participants demographic information and used these naturally occurring differences as a basis for differences in the participants' comparison sets. Our results confirmed the hypothesis that prevalence judgments of features in novel categories are sensitive to differences in their corresponding comparison categories. These results suggest a possible source for well-intentioned miscommunications.