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The Influence of Negated Causal Information on Pronoun Disambiguation

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Abstract

The disambiguation of pronouns is a complicated process that has been shown to be influenced by both linguistic and cognitive factors. In particular, readers prefer an interpretation that is causally likely. For example, in the sentence pair John accused Mark of stealing a car. He called the police, readers judge that the antecedent of he is more likely to be John than Mark because of the perceived causal link between the accusation and calling the police. I will describe new results that explore how the presence of negation affects such interpretations (e.g., He did not call the police). While, as expected, negation disrupts the perceived causal link, this disruption does not affect the choice of antecedent (John is still the preferred antecedent). This suggests that readers identify the unnegated causal relationship when interpreting the negated sentence. The implication of this result to models of pronoun disambiguation will be discussed.