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Retention of Contextually Biased Interpretations of Conceptual Combinations

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Novel expressions frequently emerge during everyday language use. For example, a demographic group of middle class mothers who spend time chauffeuring their children to soccer matches and other activities has come to be referred to as “soccer moms.” Such terms are introduced to provide labels for meanings that may not have been previously characterized in an efficient manner. These are examples of what Gerrig (1989) has referred to as *sense creation*. The present study concerns the retention of such newly created meanings.

In the series of experiments reported here, participants were asked to read a series of vignettes. All of these vignettes were designed to bias a rare interpretation, as established through out-of-context pre-testing. In the first experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups. One group was allowed to define the target conceptual combination immediately after reading the vignette, another group read all of the vignettes, then defined the target combinations, and a third group read the vignettes, then completed a 30-minute filler task prior to defining the target combinations. The second experiment was similar to the first in that a series of time delays were introduced to examine the time course of contextual bias. In this experiment, however, type of instruction (explicit reference to a subsequent memory test versus no such mention) was manipulated, in addition to length of delay (in this case, immediate, within one hour, or after two days).

Results from both experiments indicate that, while not permanent, contextual bias has a

powerful and relatively long-lasting influence on the way people interpret novel noun-noun combinations. The present study provides evidence that the interpretation of conceptual combinations cannot be completely understood by considering the relationship of the two nouns in the pair or by the relationship between the head and the modifier noun, but must also consider the powerful effects of disambiguating discourse contexts. In our study, it was shown the discourse contexts provided a more powerful influence on interpretations of noun-noun pairs than did the similarity of the nouns considered out of context. Meanings (or interpretations) that were rarely given to a pair of nouns seen out of context were strongly biased by accompanying discourse contexts. Furthermore, these contextualized interpretations persisted over time, with effects observed up to a two day retention interval even though they were only exposed a single time to the brief discourse contexts. Although discourse contexts had a strong effect on interpretations of noun-noun pairs, the number of out-of-context dominant interpretations increased following longer retention intervals. In sum, these findings indicate that interpretations of noun-noun combinations can be strongly affected both by discourse contexts as well as the relationship between the two nouns in each pair.

References

- Gerrig, R. J. (1989). The time course of sense creation. *Memory & Cognition*, 17 (2), 194-207.