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Bare Plurals in Context: Evidence from Adult Interpretation

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Abstract

English bare plurals are often interpreted as conveying a “more than one” meaning, despite their lower-bound semantics of “one or more” (Tieu et al., 2020). This multiplicity inference has been argued to arise via scalar implicature. We propose and empirically test the hypothesis that multiplicity inferences depend on whether quantity is relevant to the Question Under Discussion (QUD). In Experiment 1, English-speaking adults showed no reliable preference between bare plural descriptions of single- and multiple-object scenes in a context that did not highlight quantity. Experiment 2 manipulated the QUD by introducing comparison sets that highlighted either quantity or type differences. Adults showed stronger rejection of bare plurals for single-object scenes when quantity was contextually relevant, while judgments in control trials were unaffected. These findings suggest that multiplicity inferences are context-dependent pragmatic enrichments that arise when quantity-based alternatives are relevant to the QUD.