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Exploring the flexibility of perspective reasoning: Evidence from pronoun resolution

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Abstract

Work in psycholinguistics continues to demonstrate new ways in which perspective-taking guides language processing. E.g., recent work shows that, in sentences like “Sophie [told Amanda that]/[asked Amanda if] she likes learning new languages”, readers use perspective reasoning to judge the ambiguous pronoun as near-categorically referring to the subject antecedent in TELL (because Sophie possesses the relevant knowledge) and the object antecedent in ASK (Amanda’s knowledge). Although these patterns demonstrate a robust perspective effect, could they instead arise from shallow lexical cues provided by TELL/ASK? Experiment 1 rules out lexical-cue explanations by showing that preceding context sentences can compel readers to actually reverse the “default” antecedent judgements otherwise found for TELL/ASK sentences. Experiment 2 further explores the pragmatic basis of perspective-taking in stand-alone sentences by simply varying character properties, e.g., “Max asked his [son/tutor] Gerald if he understood the assignment correctly”, where Gerald’s role shifts who likely holds the relevant knowledge.