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Authors

Foushee, Ruther

Srinivasan, Mahesh

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Faultless disagreement judgments track adults' estimates of population-level consensus over adjective-referent pairs

Ruthe Foushee

University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, California, United States

Mahesh Srinivasan

UC Berkeley, Berkeley, California, United States

Abstract

How do we judge people wrong or right in their use of language? The words we use vary in how much their meanings depend on properties of the world we can all access ("wooden"), versus a speaker's subjective construal ("pretty"). Previous studies have obtained empirical estimates of phrases' subjectivity by asking adults to rate how faultless a disagreement over that phrase would be ("Could both speakers be right?"). Where does this underlying dimension of subjectivity come from? We show that adults' gradient judgments of faultless disagreement are systematically related to their estimates of population-level consensus ("Out of 100 people, how many would say this is a 'pretty shirt'?") over utterance-referent pairs, but that the strength of that relation varies based on semantic class: estimated levels of consensus matter less for phrases with value adjectives, like "pretty shirt." Follow-ups will investigate simulating consensus as a potential developmental mechanism for inferring subjectivity.