

The Processing of Context-Dependent and Context-Independent Scalar Implicatures

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Abstract : The default accounts hold the view that there exists a kind of scalar implicature which can be processed without context and own a psychological privilege over other scalar implicatures which depend on context. In contrast, the Relevance Theorist regards context as a must because all the scalar implicatures have to meet the need of relevance in discourse. However, in Katsos, the experimental results showed: Although quantitatively the adults rejected under-informative utterance with lexical scales (context-independent) and the ad hoc scales (context-dependent) at almost the same rate, adults still regarded the violation of utterance with lexical scales much more severe than with ad hoc scales. Neither default account nor Relevance Theory can fully explain this result. Thus, there are two questionable points to this result: (1) Is it possible that the strange discrepancy is due to other factors instead of the generation of scalar implicature? (2) Are the ad hoc scales truly formed under the possible influence from mental context? Do the participants generate scalar implicatures with ad hoc scales instead of just comparing semantic difference among target objects in the under-informative utterance? In my Experiment 1, the question (1) will be answered by repetition of Experiment 1 by Katsos. Test materials will be showed by PowerPoint in the form of pictures, and each procedure will be done under the guidance of a tester in a quiet room. Our Experiment 2 is intended to answer question (2). The test material of picture will be transformed into the literal words in DMDX and the target sentence will be showed word-by-word to participants in the soundproof room in our lab. Reading time of target parts, i.e. words containing scalar implicatures, will be recorded. We presume that in the group with lexical scale, standardized pragmatically mental context would help generate scalar implicature once the scalar word occurs, which will make the participants hope the upcoming words to be informative. Thus if the new input after scalar word is under-informative, more time will be cost for the extra semantic processing. However, in the group with ad hoc scale, scalar implicature may hardly be generated without the support from fixed mental context of scale. Thus, whether the new input is informative or not does not matter at all, and the reading time of target parts will be the same in informative and under-informative utterances. People's mind may be a dynamic system, in which lots of factors would co-occur. If Katsos' experimental result is reliable, will it shed light on the interplay of default accounts and context factors in scalar implicature processing? We might be able to assume, based on our experiments, that one single dominant processing paradigm may not be plausible. Furthermore, in the processing of scalar implicature, the semantic interpretation and the pragmatic interpretation may be made in a dynamic interplay in the mind. As to the lexical scale, the pragmatic reading may prevail over the semantic reading because of its greater exposure in daily language use, which may also lead the possible default or standardized paradigm override the role of context. However, those objects in ad hoc scale are not usually treated as scalar membership in mental context, and thus lexical-semantic association of the objects may prevent their pragmatic reading from generating scalar implicature. Only when the sufficient contextual factors are highlighted, can the pragmatic reading get privilege and generate scalar implicature.

Keywords : scalar implicature, ad hoc scale, dynamic interplay, default account, Mandarin Chinese processing

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