Generalizations from definite and indefinite generics are asymmetric

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The Generic Puzzle

- Generics provide systematic knowledge beyond personal experience
- Variable truth conditions with no correspondence to a quantifier
- Genericals can be principled or accidental
- Three syntactic configurations (in English)
  - Indefinite Singular (IS)
  - Definite Singular (DS)
  - Bare Plural (BP)
- Not freely interchangeable, different configurations not tautological

Experimental Design

- Departure from previous studies
  - All lexical words replaced by pseudowords to exclude influence of world knowledge
  - Clear distinction between questions targeting principled vs. statistical connection between subject and property
  - Controlling carefully for each subject type in stimuli (i.e. IS, DS, BP), not focusing on only one of them

Experiment 1

- ‘Leebels have a vooze.’ vs. ‘A leebel has a vooze.’
- Training Phase
- Test Phase

Experiment 2

- ‘Leebels are a vooze thing.’ vs. ‘The leebel is a vooze thing.’
- Training Phase
- Test Phase

Results

Experiment 1: Bare Plural vs. Indefinite Singular

- Conceptual Connection
  - Interaction
  - $t = 1.845, p = 0.072$
  - $t = 2.523, p = 0.015^*$

Experiment 2: Bare Plural vs. Definite Singular

- Conceptual Connection
  - Interaction
  - $t = 1.916, p = 0.062$
  - $t = 1.830, p = 0.074$

Discussion

- IS subjects denote individuals
- Increased expectations of principled connection
- Decreased expectation of statistical connection to new objects
- Reference to kinds has to do with their essential causal properties

Future Research

- IS subjects and DS subjects denote different types of connections with their properties
- Investigate the often only slight, seemingly undetectable differences between generic statements about kinds and generic statements about subjects
- How does this hold cross-linguistically?
- What are the representations that underlie BP?
- How does this lead to seemingly ambiguous behavior?
- The relationship between language and our conceptual system
- How is it guided and constrained by grammatical devices?
- How do we come to understand the conceptual status of properties in our world via grammatical distinctions?
- A much closer connection between concepts and grammar than traditionally assumed

Selected References


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