Available referents and prompt specificity influence induction of feature typicality

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Abstract

Prior work suggests that speakers and listeners use discourse pragmatics to constrain potential referents and make inferences about the relationship of a novel referent to its category. This work addresses the use of discourse specificity and available referents in combination to make inferences about category feature typicality. In a visual search task and subsequent typicality rating task, participants ratings of typicality for an novel object's color were affected by whether the objects color was specified in the search prompt (e.g., Find the (blue) dax), the color of distractor objects (same as or different from target), and the shape of distractor objects (same as or different from target). Specification of target color in the prompt decreased typicality ratings, in keeping with work suggesting that over-informative utterances can induce inference of atypicality.