

Social information eases discourse processing in human listeners

Steven Elmlinger

Princeton, Princeton, New Jersey, United States

Morten Christiansen

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, United States

Abstract

When using language, we talk often about other people. Given this skew in lived experience, we asked whether listeners process discourse with social topics more efficiently than non-social discourse. Thirty-nine participants listened to normed pairs of passages that differed only in three phrases to yield either a social or non-social topic. After listening, participants recalled all they could about the passage. While participants' recall accuracy across conditions was similar ($p = .19$), social discourse was recalled significantly faster ($M = 103$ s, $SD = 52$ s) than non-social discourse ($M = 121$ s, $SD = 80$ s, $p = .01$). Additionally, they relied less on verbatim memory for social than non-social discourse ($p < .0001$). This suggests that participants' experience with social language allows them to rely on existing social schema rather than verbatim memory. Our communicative system is sensitive to even the tiniest bit of gossip in the input.