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Entrainment: Personal Experience or Audience-Design?

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Audience-Design and Egocentric Biases

Previous studies have shown that speakers tend to entrain on original descriptions when repeatedly referring to items. Barr & Keysar (2002) suggest that entrainment results from speakers’ tendency to default to their own perspectives. In contrast, Metzing and Brennan (2003) attribute this phenomenon to speakers’ and listeners’ collaboration.

If speakers’ repeated use of referring expressions is egocentrically-based, as Barr and Keysar (2002) suggest, they should be affected by differences in their own experiences providing descriptions. In contrast, if they are constantly considering their listeners’ perspectives, beliefs about their addressees should have a greater impact on their descriptions (Wilkes-Gibbs & Clark, 1992).

Methodology

56 students described 12 images (Tangrams) in computer-mediated monologues over 3 blocks. During the first block, the Directors always had Tangram image 2 (T2), but never Tangram image 5 (T5). They saw 12 of 16 pictures each block, but were told their listeners would see all 16. Based on pilot studies, T2 can be perceived as a rabbit when presented in isolation. However, this is insufficient for differentiating T2 and T5. After exposure to T5, if speakers need to modify their original T2 description, they can provide more detail (e.g., a bunny on all fours) or change perspectives (e.g., dog) from Block 1 (B1) to Block 3 (B3).

Isaacs and Clark (1987) found that speakers consider their listeners’ backgrounds. Thus, audience-design was assessed via a manipulation of speakers’ beliefs about the nationality of their addressees: Half believed their addressees were locals; half believed their addressees were foreign English-speaking students. Speakers’ experiences were manipulated as follows: Half of the students’ first three images were difficult to describe. The other half’s first three images were easy (based on previous surveys). Thus, the factors were addressee (local or foreign) and difficulty (hard or easy), all between-groups.

Do speakers modify their original descriptions differently depending on these factors? Are they more likely to provide sufficient detail to differentiate between T2 and T5 in their original (B1) descriptions if they believed they were talking to someone from a different culture? Would they be more likely to entrain on referents if their task was initially difficult? These questions are answered in the following section.

Results and Discussion

24 students described T2 as a rabbit in B1. When they were subsequently exposed to T5, those who needed to modify their original T2 descriptions could have elaborated or changed perspectives. The only type of modification that was different for the four experimental groups was the technique whereby students changed their original perspectives. Students were six times more likely to use this technique if they were in the “easy” groups, regardless of beliefs about their listeners. Thus, speakers’ entrainment was robustly affected by initial perceptions of task-difficulty. Apparently, speakers’ experiences and cognitive load supersede audience-design, supporting Barr and Keysar’s (2002) hypothesis. Also, features such as difficulty and concentration seem to affect speakers’ tendency to consider their listeners’ perspectives.

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References


