
Reasoning with polysemes: When default inferences beat contextual information

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Abstract

How does automatic language processing shape verbal reasoning? When does it lead to fallacies? We address these questions for reasoning with polysemous verbs (verbs with distinct, but related senses) and ask when their use leads to fallacies of equivocation. The ‘linguistic salience bias hypothesis’ specifies conditions where subordinate uses of unbalanced polysemes trigger defeasible stereotypical inferences that are supported only by the dominant sense but influence further reasoning, regardless. Two new eye-tracking studies on appearance-verbs show this happens even where the verb follows disambiguating pre-verbal context that invites subordinate interpretations. Findings have consequences, e.g., for deliberate linguistic innovation (‘conceptual engineering’).

Keywords: default inferences, polysemy, appearance verbs

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