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Automatic Content Accommodation: Direct Perception and Meta-Cognitive Vigilance

An important debate in linguistics, philosophy of language and experimental psychology is how we validate the content of statements we understand. Are we capable of assessing it and filtering it out, in case it is erroneous? Or do we rather tend to automatically believe it?

We present 4 experiments testing whether participants can disbelieve the content of statements that are explicitly presented as false. In Experiment 1 we asked participants to listen to statements about two ostensible judicial cases in the form of short crime reports. The participants were informed that the two reports contained both true (e.g. female speaker) and false (e.g. male speaker) statements, as indicated by the voice of the speaker. Crucially, the content of the false statements in the one report was aggravating the crime described while the content of the false statements in the other report was attenuating the crime described. Participants had a strong tendency to judge the “aggravated” perpetrator in a more severe manner compared to the “attenuated” perpetrator. Additionally, in a memory test, participants misremembered more false statements as true than true statements as false, showing that we have a pervasive tendency to believe statements’ content.

In Experiment 1, the true statements in the reports outnumbered the false ones, just like in real life most of the utterances we hear are expected to be truthful (see Grice’s, 1975, Maxim of Quality). One could conjecture, thus, that participants’ tendency to believe the false statements presented in Experiment 1 was largely due to the fact that participants were in a context where most of the statements were true. In Experiment 2 we rendered the number of the true and false statements in the reports equal. Still, Experiment 2 replicated the above-mentioned results, even in a context where the tendency to believe statement content is not ecologically valid.

In the last two experiments we tested two factors that might potentially increase participants’ vigilance, and reduce their pervasive tendency to believe statements’ content: accountability (Experiment 3) and financial incentives (Experiment 4). Participants who were informed that they would have to account for their judgments in our experimental setting, still, tended to be influenced in their judgments by the false statements, as well as to misremember the false statements as true. Nevertheless, offering participants financial incentives for accurately judging the perpetrators, eliminated these tendencies.

The present findings go against widespread post-Gricean pragmatic theories (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) assuming that linguistic communication passes by complex meta-representations of the speakers’ communicative intentions. We posit a *Direct Perception Mechanism* (DPM) entrenched in the statement comprehension process (e.g. Millikan, 2005; Recanati, 2002). Specifically, we argue that addressees tend to automatically accommodate the contents of statements they hear and read in a way that resembles visual perception. Such a DPM is particularly evolutionarily plausible if language is viewed as a mechanism evolved to facilitate

information exchange (Jackendoff & Pinker, 2005; Pinker & Jackendoff, 2005) among cooperative agents (Kissine & Klein, 2013).

Nevertheless, in those contexts where statements' content is inaccurate, the DPM is inadequate. Experiments 3 and 4 suggest that while it is hard to disbelieve statements we hear and read, there are cases where people can be sufficiently vigilant. However, we argue that the operation of vigilance is costly and consists in effortful meta-cognitive processes, which is the reason why the tendency to believe is relatively hard to override. We will present a fully-fledged cognitive model of statement validation, defining the conditions under which the DPM operates, and those where people will be vigilant and manage to filter out statements' content.

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