

Personae and pragmatic reasoning: How speaker information affects imprecision resolution

Recent work at the interface of semantics and sociolinguistics proposed that the linguistic signaling and uptake of social identity traits can be captured via models similar to those used to formalize pragmatic inferences (Acton 2019; Burnett 2017, 2019) and non-at-issue content (Smith et al. 2010); and provided empirical evidence that listeners reason about the semantic/pragmatic properties of linguistic utterances to draw social inferences about the speaker (Acton and Potts 2014; Beltrama 2016, 2018; Jeong 2018; Thomas 2021). While highlighting a principled connection between dimensions of meaning that have been long thought of as separate from one another, these findings crucially raise the question of whether reverse effects exist as well: can social meanings conversely impact the interpretation of semantic/pragmatic meanings? And if so, how does the effect of social information compare to the effect of other contextual cues (e.g., world knowledge; conversational expectations; discourse structure) on the interpretation of meaning? In this project, I take a first step towards addressing these questions by focusing on the interpretation of numerals.

- (1) a. It's 3 o'clock.
- b. The ticket costs \$300.

These forms emerge as an ideal object of investigation for our purposes for two distinct reasons. First, their interpretation can be associated with varying margins of imprecision: an actual time of “2:57” could be reported precisely as “2:57”, or less precisely as “3 o'clock” (Lasersohn 1999 i.a.). While different formal proposals have been advanced to capture this space of variability (see, i.a., Pinkal 1995; Krifka 2002; Kennedy 2007; Sauerland Stateva 2007; Krifka 2009; Cobreros et al. 2012; Cummins et al. 2012; Burnett 2014; Solt 2014; Aparicio 2017; Klecha 2018), these accounts by-and-large converge on the idea that the deployment of numerals introduces an element of indeterminacy in meaning interpretation, requiring that comprehenders determine the appropriate margin of (im)precision/granularity in the context. Second, it has been shown that the level of precision signaled by the speaker also systematically licenses inferences about the social identity of the interlocutor, with highly precise speakers typically associated with clusters of social qualities (i.e., “educated”, “articulate”; Beltrama 2018) and social groups (“Nerd”, Bucholtz 2001). In turn, these two properties raise the question of whether expectations generated by the speaker's identity impact how comprehenders set their imprecision standards, and how this effect is modulated by comprehenders' own alignment with the identity categories embodied by the speaker.

Based on evidence from a picture selection task, I show that (i) numerals receive stricter, more precise interpretations when uttered by **Nerdy** (vs. **Chill**) speakers; and that (ii) this effect is stronger for comprehenders who don't (strongly) identify with the speaker. Taken together, these findings suggest that social meanings are more intricately intertwined with pragmatic reasoning than previously thought: not only is the signaling of social meanings amenable to being formalized through the same reasoning patterns that can be applied to pragmatic inferences (see e.g. Burnett 2019 on *signaling games*); but social meanings are also recruited by comprehenders to resolve the indeterminacy surrounding the interpretation of semantic meanings – here, to calculate the threshold of imprecision that should be assigned to a numeral. The emerging picture is one in which different layers of meanings inform one other in a bi-directional fashion – i.e., semantic information can invite social inferences, and social information can guide meaning interpretation – highlighting the importance of integrating the study of social content into theoretical and experimental semantics and pragmatics.