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Comparing Theories of Speaker Choice Using Classifier Production in Mandarin Chinese

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Speakers often have more than one way to express the same meaning. What general principles govern speaker choice in the face of optionality when near semantically invariant alternation exists? Studies have shown that optional reduction in language is sensitive to contextual predictability, where the more predictable a linguistic unit is, the more likely it gets reduced. Yet it is unclear whether speaker choice is geared toward audience design, or toward facilitating production. Here we argue that for a different optionality phenomenon, namely classifier choice in Mandarin Chinese, Uniform Information Density and at least one plausible variant of availability-based production make opposite predictions regarding the relationship between the predictability of the upcoming material and speaker choices. In a corpus analysis of Mandarin Chinese, we show that the distribution of speaker choices supports the availability-based production account, and not Uniform Information Density.