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Listeners use descriptive contrast to disambiguate novel referents

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Abstract

People often face referential ambiguity; one cue to resolve it is adjectival description. Beyond narrowing potential referents to those that match a descriptor, listeners may infer that a described object is one that contrasts with other present objects of the same type (tall cup contrasts with another, shorter cup). This contrastive inference guides the visual identification of a familiar referent as an utterance progresses (Sedivy et al., 1999). We extend this work, asking whether listeners use this type of inference to guide explicit referent choice when reference is ambiguous, and whether this varies with adjective type. We find that participants consistently use size adjectives contrastively, but not color adjectives (Experiment 1) even when color is described with more relative language (Experiment 2) or emphasized with prosodic stress (Experiment 3). Listeners can use adjective contrast to disambiguate a novel words referent, but do not treat all adjective types as equally contrastive.