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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title
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Permalink

Journal
Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 27(27)

ISSN

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Publication Date
2005

Peer reviewed

Truthfulness and Relevance in Japanese

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Introduction

According to relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), the greater the true consequences derivable from an utterance, and the smaller the effort required to derive them, the greater the relevance of the utterance for the hearer. In this respect, there are some cases in which not strictly truthful utterances are optimally relevant.

For example, if we are asked, "What time is it?" when our watch reads 10:08, the likely answer is "It's ten past ten." This rounded answer is easier to process and may carry the same consequences as one that is accurate to the minute. Van der Henst, Carles, & Sperber (2002) tested the above for French.

In general, people try to minimize their effort in speaking as in any other action. Therefore, if people are asked for the time, it is generally easier to round their answer for those with analogue watches, and just reading aloud the exact time indicated by their watch should be easier for those with digital watches. Therefore, if speakers rounded off merely to minimize their own effort, then people with analogue watches would round off and people with digital watches would not. On the contrary, if speakers are disposed to try and minimize their hearer's effort, then not only people with analogue watches, but also a significant percentage of people with digital watches would round off the time.

Van der Henst et al. (2002) showed that 97% of people with analogue watches and 57% of people with digital watches rounded off in their experiment 1. Hence, they confirmed that people tend to try and minimize their hearer's effort. However, the participants of the above study were French. The present study was conducted for Japanese to investigate whether Japanese exhibit the same tendency.

Method

Participants One hundred and fifty-three Japanese undergraduate students participated in the present study.

Materials and Procedure Participants were tested in-group. The following three scenarios corresponding to experiment 1 to experiment 3 in Van der Henst et al. (2002) were prepared in one questionnaire.

Scenario 1: "When you were walking along a street, someone asked you, 'Hello! Do you have the time please? I don't have my watch.'"

Scenario 2: "When you were walking along a street, someone asked you, 'Hello! Do you have the time please? My watch isn't working properly, so I need to adjust it.'"

Scenario 3: "When you were walking along a street, someone asked you, 'Hello! Do you have the time please? I have an important appointment at 10:30 (or 5:00), so I have to go to that building over there.'"

After each scenario, the question of "So, you looked at your watch and answered as follows. Enter your answer in the next box" was prepared.

A figure of an analogue or digital watch was prepared as "your watch" in each scenario on the questionnaire. There were 48 time patterns that each watch indicated: 10:01 to 10:04, 10:06 to 10:09, 10:11 to 10:14, 10:16 to 10:19, 10:21 to 10:24, 10:26 to 10:29, 4:31 to 4:34, 4:36 to 4:39, 4:41 to 4:44, 4:46 to 4:49, 4:51 to 4:54, and 4:56 to 4:59. The figure of the analogue or digital watch and the time were counterbalanced in each scenario between participants.

Results and discussion

In scenario 1, 70% of answers were given as multiples of 5 in the analogue condition and 38% in the digital condition. Therefore, although participants under the digital condition rounded off less than those under the analogue one, a majority of them made an extra effort to diminish the effort of their hearer.

In scenario 2, accuracy to the minute would be more relevant. The result was that 17% of answers were given as multiples of 5 in the analogue condition and 8% in the digital condition. The percentage of rounders under both conditions decreased remarkably compared with scenario 1.

In scenario 3, participants were divided into two groups based on Van der Henst et al. (2002): the "earlier" group of those who were presented a time between 29 and 26, 24 and 21, or 19 and 16 minutes before the time of the appointment, and the "later" group of those who were presented a time between 14 and 11, 9 and 6, or 4 and 1 minutes before the time of the appointment. In the analogue condition, 69% of answers were in multiples of 5 in the earlier group and 45% in the later group. Under the digital condition, 39% of answers were in multiples of 5 in the earlier group and 26% in the later group. There was a significant difference between earlier and later groups under both conditions.

The above results were similar overall to Van der Henst et al. (2002), although there was a methodological difference and the percentage of rounders in Japanese was lower overall than in French. Speakers tend to "make the effort of inferring what information may be relevant for their hearer" and "spontaneously adjust the level of accuracy of their utterances by considering the context." The results suggest that this tendency is universal.

References

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