
Accessibility vs. inference in accessibility-driven semantic extension

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Previous work has shown that extension of a form to a novel meaning can be caused by high frequency of the form in the speaker's experience (Harmon & Kapatsinski 2017; Koranda et al. 2022). Furthermore, Harmon and Kapatsinski (2017) have shown that even though frequent forms are more likely to be extended to novel meanings than infrequent forms in production, there is no preference to express the same novel meaning with the frequent form in a forced choice task. This result strongly suggests that frequent forms are preferentially extended to novel meanings because they are more accessible than infrequent forms. Consequently, once frequent and infrequent forms are made equally accessible (via a forced choice task), the tendency to extend frequent forms disappears.

However, experimental studies of semantic extension have not decoupled token and type frequency – the frequent forms have had both higher type frequency and higher token frequency than infrequent forms. Theoretically, the results can therefore be accounted for in at least two ways. In inferential models, extension is a consequence of inferring that the form is likely to appear in new meanings. Under these models, extension is caused by high type frequency and is made less likely by high token frequency (Baayen 1993). In associative models, extension is due to a strong association between a frequent form and semantic features shared by the old and new contexts. Here, it is token frequency that causes extension by strengthening the form-meaning associations (Caballero & Kapatsinski 2022)

In ongoing experiments, we therefore manipulated token and type frequency of suffixes independently and tested participants' use of these forms in response to a novel meaning. Inferential models predict that the frequent form should only have the advantage when it has higher type frequency, while associative models predict that token frequency should be the primary influence.

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