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NEWS RELEASE

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Literal Lucy to the Rescue: A New Way to Distinguish Between Literal Meaning and Contextual Meaning

(Washington, DC) – A new linguistic study of how individuals interpret various types of utterances sheds more light on how literal and contextual meaning are distinguished. The study, “A novel empirical paradigm for distinguishing between What is Said and What is Implicated,” to be published in the March 2012 issue of the scholarly journal *Language*, is authored by Ryan Doran, Gregory Ward, Meredith Larson, Yaron McNabb, and Rachel E. Baker, a team of linguists based at Northwestern University. A preprint version is available online at: <http://lsadc.org/info/documents/2012/press-releases/doran-et-al.pdf>

Within linguistics and philosophy, two types of utterance meaning have traditionally been distinguished: semantic meaning, based on the literal meaning of the words themselves, and pragmatic meaning, based on how the sentence is used in a particular context. Over the past decade, there has been an explosion of empirical work exploring the line between these two types of meaning. However, few researchers have explored whether and under what conditions speakers can reliably isolate semantic meaning from pragmatic meaning. The new study by the Northwestern researchers does just this.

Using a novel paradigm in which participants assume the point of view of a literal-minded third person, Literal Lucy, the researchers tested whether speakers were able to tease apart semantic meaning from pragmatic meaning. Participants read through short vignettes and determined whether sentences containing certain key phrases (e.g., gradable adjectives, cardinals, quantifiers) were literally still true even in contexts that favored a more natural, pragmatic interpretation.

Their study found that speakers were in fact able to tease apart pragmatic elements of meaning from semantic ones but that the ability to do so is sensitive both to the particular type of phrase used in the sentence as well as the point of view a speaker adopts (e.g., his or her own, or that of a third party). By adopting a third-party perspective and relying upon their folk notion of interpreting literally, speakers were able to distinguish between semantic and pragmatic meaning more reliably.

(more)

These findings have implications both for future research into the theoretical distinction between semantics and pragmatics and for the empirical investigation of this distinction. The fact that participants' ability to distinguish semantic from pragmatic meaning was sensitive to the different types of phrases used in the experiment is not predicted by the theoretical literature classifying types of pragmatic meanings. This finding raises questions concerning the psychological validity of such classifications. For the empirical investigation of semantic and pragmatic meaning, the fact that, when interpreting from the perspective of Literal Lucy, speakers more frequently drew this distinction suggests that speakers need appropriate criteria to guide their judgments about an utterance's meaning.

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The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) publishes the peer-reviewed journal, Language, four times per year. The LSA is the largest national professional society representing the field of linguistics. Its mission is to advance the scientific study of language.