

Using precedents to find referents: Evidence for pragmatic heuristics in language comprehension

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In spoken dialogue, speakers tend to be consistent in how they refer to particular referents, and listeners benefit from this consistency. We explore two explanations for this comprehension benefit: a Gricean explanation based on reasoning about a speaker's intentions, and a non-Gricean explanation in terms of speaker-independent cognitive heuristics. Supporting the latter view, a series of studies finds that: (1) the benefit is speaker-independent; (2) that reasoning about the speaker's intentions seems to take place only when default heuristics fail; and (3) that expectations of consistency are situation specific, but not speaker specific.