Informationally redundant utterances trigger pragmatic inferences

Work in pragmatics shows that speakers typically avoid stating information already given in the discourse (Horn, 1984). However, it’s unclear how listeners interpret utterances which assert material that can be inferred using prior knowledge. We argue that informationally redundant utterances can trigger context-dependent implicatures, which increase utterance utility in line with listener expectations (Atlas & Levinson, 1981; Horn, 1984). In two experiments, we look at utterances which refer to event sequences describing common activities (scripts, such as ‘going to a grocery store’).

The first experiment shows that listeners may assign informationally redundant event mentions (such as ‘John went to the store. He paid the cashier!’) an ‘informative’ pragmatic interpretation, by reinterpreting the activity in question as relatively atypical in context (i.e. ‘John does not typically pay the cashier’). Such a (re-)interpretation does not arise for event mentions that are informative either a priori, or in context. A second experiment, which replaced the exclamation point at the end of the utterance with a period, however, shows that the effect is substantially tempered when the utterance is not otherwise marked as ‘important’ or ‘surprising.’ This shows that discourse status, independent of the linguistic content of an utterance, can influence the likelihood of it giving rise to a specific pragmatic inference.

Overall, these studies show that explicit mention of highly inferable events may be systematically reconciled with an assumption that a speaker is being informative, giving rise to context-dependent implicatures regarding event ‘typicality’. This effect, however, is modulated by the informational status of the utterance, possibly similar to the effects of prosody on implicature generation. Overall, the results suggest that excessive informational redundancy of event utterances is perceived as anomalous, and that listeners alter their situation models in order to accommodate it.