How does over-specification affect referent identification?

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Abstract

Five eye-tracking experiments examined whether and under what circumstances over-specified adjectives hinder or facilitate referent identification. We show that when the referring expressions and visual displays are presented simultaneously, the adjectives are processed incrementally, such that after a fully discriminating first adjective, the inclusion of a second adjective will not facilitate early identification, even if the second adjective denotes a highly salient attribute and therefore improves fixations to the target. By contrast, when all the attributes have been heard before the display presentation, the attributes could be used in parallel to identify the referent. In such situations, a later-mentioned adjective speeds up identification, as well as enhances looks to the target if it denotes a salient discriminating attribute (e.g., color); however, the inclusion of a less salient attribute (e.g., pattern) delays identification and tends to hamper fixations to the target.