The pragmatics of truth-value judgments

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Abstract

Investigations of linguistic meaning rely crucially on truth-value judgments: whether a sentence can truthfully describe a given scenario. On the basis of such judgments, researchers have concluded that young children perform quite differently from adults when it comes to understanding ambiguous utterances with multiple potential meanings. For example, when adults hear “Every horse didn’t jump over the fence,” they entertain two interpretations: either none of the horses jumped or not all of the horses jumped. Children usually only endorse the “none” interpretation, rejecting the utterance in a scenario where only two out of three horses jumped. However, subtle changes to the truth-value judgment task setup make children more adult-like. I summarize key results from the literature on child ambiguity resolution, noting three core variables that affect children’s disambiguation behavior. One of these variables concerns children’s processing ability: how easy it is to access the different grammatical interpretations. The other two variables concern children’s ability to manage the pragmatic context: understanding what the topic of conversation is, and modulating expectations about the world being described. I also highlight the nature of the truth-value judgment task children are being asked to engage in, which I then formally articulate using a cognitive computational model that specifies the role of each of these three variables in providing truth-value judgments. The results suggest that pragmatic factors play a larger role than grammatical processing factors in explaining children’s non-adult-like ambiguity resolution behavior, and the computational modeling framework allows us to understand exactly why that’s so. Indeed, by modeling the task itself, we see that the truth-value judgment data typically used to demonstrate children’s difficulty with ambiguity in fact require no disambiguation at all -- just the ability to manage the pragmatics of the task.