

Words are weird? On the role of lexical ambiguity in language

Words, like many other domains in language, are massively ambiguous. This has long posed a puzzle, for ambiguity seems to run counter to the communicative function of language. At the same time, an increasing body of research suggests that there are competing pressures on language, with cognitive pressures steering linguistic systems toward simplicity, and communicative pressures toward complexity. In this talk, I will argue that ambiguity is a good solution to the contrasting demands posed by cognitive and communicative pressures.

I will present a series of large-scale studies that examine the characteristics of the lexicon and of naming behavior in humans, using quantitative and computational methods. Along the way, I will showcase how word meaning is approached in computational linguistics.

REFERENCES

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