

“Rationality” and number interpretation in L1 and L2

Chris Cummins

University of Edinburgh

Given the potential ambiguity of number in natural language—where “200 people” might evoke an exact interpretation, a lower bound, an upper bound, an approximate interpretation, or some combination of these—understanding a speaker’s meaning precisely correctly poses a considerable challenge in such cases. Experiments on cognitive biases that involve number, such as framing effects, have traditionally assumed a straightforward punctual interpretation of numerals. Recent research on bilingualism, also following this tradition, has elicited evidence for enhanced rationality in L2 reasoning compared to L1, conjecturally because the heuristics that underpin cognitive biases are more active in L1 reasoning. However, an alternative explanation is that L2 users are obtaining number interpretations that are not precisely nativelike in such experiments. In this talk, I discuss the evidence for this claim, and its implications for our understanding of number meanings and their use in cognitive bias experiments.