

The cognitive costs and benefits of encoding and interpreting colour adjectives

Euro-XPrag Collaborative Research Project

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The work proposed in this project consists of a series of experiments investigating whether and when people might use colour adjectives redundantly. For example, when somebody asks 'Could you pass me the red coat?' in a context where there is only one coat. Our hypothesis is that, because colour is so visually salient, it might be that at least in certain contexts, it is cognitively cheaper to encode a colour adjective than to determine whether its use is informative or redundant in the given context.

In order to investigate this question, we proposed to carry out various production experiments where participants have to make simple requests for an object and we manipulate different conditions that should have an effect on whether participants chose to use colour adjectives informatively or redundantly. Also, we proposed to run an eye-tracking experiment investigating the interpretation of colour adjectives, in particular whether participants might take longer to identify an object when it has been described with a redundant colour adjective (as in the above example).

The purpose of our second meeting was threefold:

First, we planned to run two conditions that were missing from our colour production study.

Second, we wanted to design and pilot one last eye-tracking experiment looking at the question of whether redundant colour adjectives in object requests effectively facilitate object identification.

Finally, we wanted to get an overview of all the data that I have collected for our project at various universities in the last two years and discuss how to best distribute the experiments into independent papers.

The three objectives of the visit were met:

In the end, I had the opportunity to run not just two but three more experiments looking at the production of colour adjectives in simple object requests. We therefore consider the production part of our study completed.

We designed, set up and piloted one more comprehension task looking at whether redundant colour adjectives are advantageous in object identification. Given the positive results, we now plan to run this eye-tracking experiment in Kent, where my colleague Heather Ferguson has an eye-tracking lab.

Finally, we decided to write two papers in relation with our project, one investigating the production of redundant colour adjectives and another one focusing on the comprehension of this type of adjectives. Depending on the results of the last experiment, we may write a third short paper reporting the last study as a follow up.

Overall, this was a very productive and interesting meeting given that we had most of our data on the table and we felt we had gained considerable understanding of our initial research questions. Thank you very much for giving us this opportunity.