

My Assignment 3: The small world hypothesis

Chris Potts, Ling 390a: Controlling the Discourse, Fall 2007

Oct 17

1 Hypothesis

The hypothesis I'm exploring is due to Will Evans:¹

Will Evans. 2005. Small worlds of discourse and the spectrum of accommodation. UMass Amherst Honors Thesis.

In order for a single new entity to be introduced with the definite article, the scope of its frame of reference must be small enough to single that entity out as more relevant than all others of its type. In this way, an entity designated by the definite article must be *locally unique* within its frame of reference.

2 Data

In each pair of examples, the first satisfies the demands of the small world hypothesis, whereas the second does not. The prediction is that subjects will tend to favor the first (even if they are not crazy about any of the examples).

- (1) a. Lyla opened the book. The page was ripped.
b. Lyla flipped through the book. The page was ripped.
- (2) a. Juan drove up to the busy tollbooths. The toll taker was rude.
b. Juan looked at the busy tollbooths. The toll taker was rude.
- (3) a. Sam picked up his bicycle at the bicycle shop. The front wheel still seemed misaligned.
b. Sam paid a visit to the bicycle shop. The front wheel still seemed misaligned.
- (4) a. At the coffee shop, Joan was reading near the back. The table was a bit tippy.
b. At the coffee shop, Joan looked around for a place to sit. The table was a bit tippy.

In the actual study, I'll have 3-4 filler examples for each one of the above. The fillers will have the same basic shape as these, and participants will perform the same basic task for them.

¹So this is a bit of a cheat. You need to come up with your own hypothesis. But the small world hypothesis is excellent for us to explore anyway, and Will began this project in Controlling the Discourse.

