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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 47(0)

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Publication Date

2025

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Peer reviewed

Speakers strategically adjust their descriptions based on perceived memorability

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Abstract

When talking about the world in front of us, humans are remarkably efficient communicators. Our referential expressions help listeners efficiently find what we're talking about by strategically adding color or material words. But most conversations involve things not physically in front of us. In these cases, do we also use language to efficiently help a listener retrieve an item from memory? Across two experiments, we asked participants to describe images to help a listener recall them. In Experiment 1 ($n = 600$), participants spontaneously incorporated expectations about memorability by providing more description for images they expected to be less memorable. People's descriptions aligned more with subjective memorability estimates rather than objective, empirically-derived metrics. In Experiment 2 ($n = 300$), we replicated this pattern even when participants had no access to their listener's prior experience. Together, this work provides evidence that speakers spontaneously guide listeners' mental processes to effectively facilitate memory recall.