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Exploring context's role in the interpretation of novel noun compounds

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Abstract

Noun compounding is a productive word formation strategy in English. Low-frequency (hence: 'novel') noun compounds (NCs) like "animal teacher" elicit diverse responses when presented without a sentence context, suggesting that they are semantically underspecified. We explore exactly how much the role of context changes default interpretations of novel English NCs. We consider compounds with two plausible interpretations: OF-relations (teacher OF animals) and IS-relations (animal who IS a teacher). We predicted context would increase participants' ratings of the plausibility of given compound interpretations. Corroborating our predictions, participant plausibility ratings showed OF-relations were more accessible out-of-context, and IS-relations were rated with less certainty. Mixed-effects modelling showed a significant interaction between context and relation type. The results suggest context increases interpretation certainty, particularly in OF-dominant compounds. However, several groups of cases notably defy this pattern. Finally, we use computational language models to identify aspects of context that are critical to novel NC interpretation.