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Lexical Ambiguity in Elementary Inferences: an Experimental Study

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In this paper we discuss how common meaning ambiguities (homonymy, polysemy and metaphors) influence the understanding of an elementary argument. In order to understand how, and to what extent, participants' intuitions on the strength of a syllogism are influenced by meaning ambiguities, we present the results of a pilot study. The study specifically focuses on a fallacy of lexical ambiguity, where the meanings of the middle term diverge in the two premises. We hypothesize that the evaluation of the strength of an argument of this sort is related to the nature of the ambiguity of its middle term and to the pragmatic process required to disambiguate the ambiguous meanings. We expect the persuasiveness of the syllogism to be directly proportional to the degree of semantic superposition of the meanings of the middle term.