

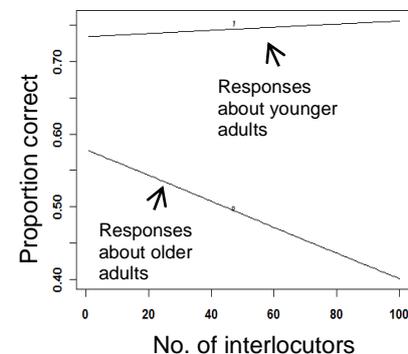
THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL CIRCLE SIZE AND HETEROGENEITY ON SEMANTIC SKILLS

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People differ in the size and heterogeneity of their social circle. Previous research shows that people learn phonetic features better if they are exposed to more variable input (e.g., Bradlow & Bent, 2008). These experiments test whether having a larger or more variable social circle, and therefore more variable input, boosts *semantic* skills, and, specifically, lexical prediction (exp. 1) and comprehension of evaluative expressions (exp. 2).

Lexical choice varies with age. Therefore, interacting with people of different ages should lead to a more representative sample of naming patterns, leading to better prediction of people's lexical selection. Correct prediction is important as prediction is an integral aspect of language processing and is also related to comprehension ease and success. 55 participants were recruited via M-Turk. Participants reported how many people they regularly talk to in a week and the age range of their main group of interlocutors. Participants then performed a picture naming task on a set of pictures (N=33) for which name agreement norms for two age groups - college students and 60-75 year olds - exist. For each picture, participants provided the most common name that (1) college students and (2) 60-75 year olds would use to describe the picture. A mixed model analysis revealed that the wider the age range of participants' main social circle, the better they performed. So, having a more *variable* social circle makes one better at predicting people's lexical choice.

Additionally, the model tested whether having a *larger* social circle also improves people's lexical predictions (social circle size did not correlate with circle's age range). On the one hand, interacting with more people leads to a larger sample of naming patterns, and might therefore improve performance. On the other hand, the weight given to any token is reduced in larger samples, reducing the influence of interlocutors that are different from one's common interlocutor. Indeed, the same mixed model analysis revealed that participants with more interlocutors performed worse in predicting older adults', but not college students' responses. As most of our participants were young (M=33.5), and predicted better the responses of college students, these results show that a larger social circle can lead to worse performance with interlocutors different from one's common interaction partners.



Experiment 2 tested the influence of social circle size on global comprehension. Evaluative words (e.g., 'good') can express different degrees of positivity when used by different people. I tested participants' ability to decode the meaning that evaluative terms express when used by different people. Participants read elicited restaurant reviews from 2 reviewers: 6 reviews for each of 5 star levels for each reviewer (N=60). Participants estimated how many stars the reviewer assigned for the restaurant. The larger participants' social circle, the better they were at decoding the intensity of the review.

These studies show that the characteristics of one's social circle influence one's semantic skills. Specifically, having a more heterogeneous social circle boosts lexical prediction, while a larger social circle can boost comprehension of typical speakers but might be detrimental for performance with dissimilar interlocutors. This study opens up a window for studying how different aspects of one's social circle influence different linguistic skills.