Variation in the rational interpretation of slights: Gender-based microaggressions
Bethany Gardner¹ & Chigusa Kurumada²

Background

- Microaggressions: interactions that implicitly convey to a marginalized group that they are unwelcome, unqualified, or otherwise inferior. [1-2]
- One issue with both studies and policies is that microaggressions are ambiguous: one person can interpret an interaction as sexist or discriminatory, while another can perceive it as neutral.
- Grice (1975) Conversational implicature: (1) “You’re good at math for a woman” or (2) “You’re actually good at math.” When these modifiers are not informative in the given context ➔ implicate “…and I didn’t expect this about someone like you.”

Exp1 Methods

- Sentences in the frame: [Male Name/Female Name] said to [Female Name], “You’re X.”
- 18 critical trials with compliments on gender-stereotyped traits:
  - Neutral: You’re good at math.
  - Actually: You’re actually good at math.
  - For a Woman: You’re good at math for a woman.
- 18 filler trials with neutral compliments (“Your new shirt looks great!”)
- Rated Politeness on 7-point scale (1=extremely impolite, 7=extremely polite)
- N=203 from MTurk

Exp1 Results

Do “actually” and “for a woman” elicit microaggression interpretations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politeness Ratings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Least Polite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actually for a woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political party affiliation predicts politeness ratings most strongly in For a Woman trials, also in Actually trials, but not in Neutral trials. TT*MSS: p<.001

Exp2 Methods

Added task (N=100 from MTurk), with ratings from 1-7 (1=very bad, 7=very good)

- Context 1: Mary is a math major. Prior Rating: How good at math do you think Mary is?
- Context 2: You overhear John saying to Mary, “You’re actually good at math.” Posterior Rating: After hearing John, how good at math do you think Mary is?

Two possible interpretations of “actually” and “for a woman” (A/FW) leading to Exp1 results:

1. Don’t make the implicature A/FW are informative More change in rating
2. Make the implicature, but judge it polite A/FW are not informative Less change in rating

Exp2 Results

Do listeners weight the informativity of microaggression statements differently?

- Actually and For a Woman were interpreted as less informative than Neutral trials (p<.001), suggesting that listeners are deriving the conversational implicature, but varying in how polite it is (Interpretation 2).
- Independents and Democrats increased their ratings Prior→Post more than Republicans (p<.05), but the interaction with Trial Type was not significant. This suggests that the differences in ratings in Exp1 come more from the politeness judgement than from the underlying implicature (Interpretation 2).
- Participants with more liberal scores on the MSS had larger differences between the 3 trial types (p<.001).
- Gender of the speaker (i.e., the grammatical subject) did not have an effect in either Exp1 or Exp2.

Discussion

Importance of accounting for individual variations in pragmatic inferences: Linguistic (modifiers, sentence structure) and non-linguistic (party, MSS) factors combine to predict how listeners vary in their interpretations of the same utterance.

These types of gender-based microaggressions likely arise through implicatures about the speaker’s prior expectations: Future directions: speaker context (audio/visual stimuli), prosody, prior experiences.

Modern Sexism Scale
Beliefs about prevalence of implicit sexism, e.g. equal job opportunities, media representation [3]