COMMENTARY

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Salience Counts—And So Does Accuracy: Correcting and Updating a Measure for Free-List-Item Salience

Through a series of almost comical errors (for which the senior author takes full responsibility), a recent *JLA* article on English color terms inaccurately described a measure of free-list-item salience (Smith et al. 1995:206). Fortunately, the analysis suffered little material harm; but in order for the measure to have general value for studies utilizing free-listing data collection, colleagues need a more accurate description of its calculation than appears in the 1995 article. For a set of free-list data, the index is designed to take into account both the frequency and rank order of items in the lists. Its correct formulation is

$$S = ((\Sigma (L - R_j + 1))/L)/N$$

where S is the average rank of an item across all lists in the sample, weighted by the lengths of the lists in which the item actually occurs; L = the length of

(number of items in) a list; R_j = the rank of item j in the list (first = 1); and N = the number of lists in the sample.

For the study of English color terms, Smith et alia 1995 employed Anthropac 4.00 (Borgatti 1992), which (we later learned) contained a slightly different formula for S that assigned a score of zero to items appearing last in a list. The same score (zero) was necessarily assigned to an item that did not appear in that list at all. As originally proposed by Smith (1993) and realized in the formula shown above, the last-mentioned item in a list earns a score of $1/L$, so that the computation awards it a minimal measure of salience and distinguishes it from the zero-valued nonmentioned items.

For a large number of lists, the differences are barely discernible. The main effect is a slight lowering of index scores if last-mentions and nonmentions are both (incorrectly) valued at zero. It is the difference in conceptualizing what the index is measuring that really matters. Mention and non-mention are at the heart of the free-list exercise. To claim to measure the salience of items in free list data, a distinction between these conditions must be made.

An accurate implementation of the free-list salience index may be found in versions since 4.92 of Borgatti's Anthropac (such as Borgatti 1996), where the index is referred to as Smith's S.

References Cited

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