Failing Alternatives Lower the Acceptability of Definite Descriptions

Background: The acceptability of definite descriptions (e.g., *the star*) is lowered when comprehenders consider alternatives that fail to refer to one unique referent (Aparicio, 2022; Aparicio et al., 2025). Using an acceptability judgement task in English, we investigate whether suppressing non-viable alternative descriptions during comprehension lowers the acceptability of a definite description. We test DPs with one or two prenominal modifiers (e.g., *the small/er/est (purple) star*). One-adjective phrases being more common than two-adjective phrases (based on analyses of COCA), we hypothesized that participants will predict a head noun after the first adjective (e.g., *the small/er/est* [N]) during incremental interpretation, a prediction that must be discarded once the second adjective is processed. Additionally, we hypothesized that prediction of a failing alternative should be less frequent depending on the lexical semantics of the gradable adjective form: compared to comparative (COMP; *smaller*) and superlative (SUP; *smallest*) gradable adjectives, positive-form (POS; *small*) gradable adjectives should lead to more predictions of head nouns after the first adjective, thus showing greater decreases in acceptability for the POS forms (Aparicio, 2022; Aparicio et al., 2025).

Experiment: (N=84) We ran an acceptability judgment task which tested the two-modifier descriptions, where the one and two-modifier alternatives select different referents. Participants saw sentences like "*This is the* [size Adj.] ([color Adj.]) [N]" alongside visual displays where the intended target was underlined (Fig. 1). Half of the experimental trials were no-competitor trials which consisted of 2 or 3 objects matching in shape and color, but differing in size. The other half of the experimental trials were competitor trials, which consisted of the no-competitor displays plus an additional object of a different size and color (3 or 4 objects total) that could serve as the referent of the (failing) alternative one-adjective description. No-competitor and filler trials were presented such that only the gradable adjectives were present and they were sufficient to pick out the target referent ensuring the one-adjective alternatives remained salient.

Results: While all conditions received high ratings (>6; Fig. 2A), by-participant z-scored judgments were lower in competitor conditions compared to no-competitor conditions ($p<0.05$; Fig. 2B). We fit two mixed-effects models – one for POS (3 Pics)/COMP and one for POS (4 Pics)/SUP – to predict z-scored judgements with fixed effects of Adjective Form, Competitor Presence and their interaction:[1] we find that POS adjective forms, competitors being present, and the interaction of these fixed effects all decreased z-scored acceptability judgments compared to the other levels.

Discussion: We find that the presence of a competitor lowers acceptability judgments and that this decrease is stronger for POS than for COMP or SUP. Even when they are contextually non-viable, possible alternatives are generated during comprehension and continue to affect comprehension into offline tasks. These results suggest that online measures of similar materials would be able to provide further clarity on how online comprehension affects offline judgements and what predictions are generated online.

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[1] z-ScoredJudgement ~AdjectiveForm * CompetitorPresence + (1+AdjectiveForm*CompetitorPresence|Subject) +(1+AdjectiveForm*CompetitorPresence|Condition).
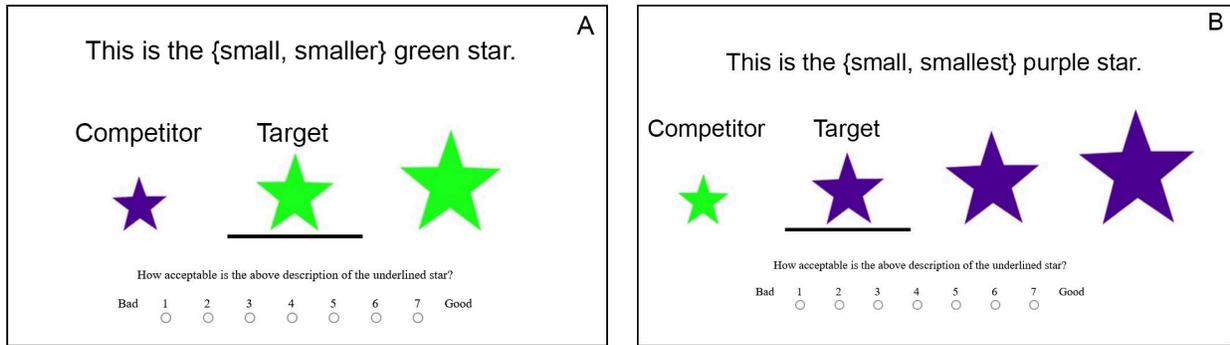
Figure 1. A: Exp1 3-picture sample display for the competitor condition ; **B:** Exp1 4-picture sample display competitor condition. No-competitor conditions differed only in the removal of the competitor shape and the removal of the color adjective from the stimulus sentence.
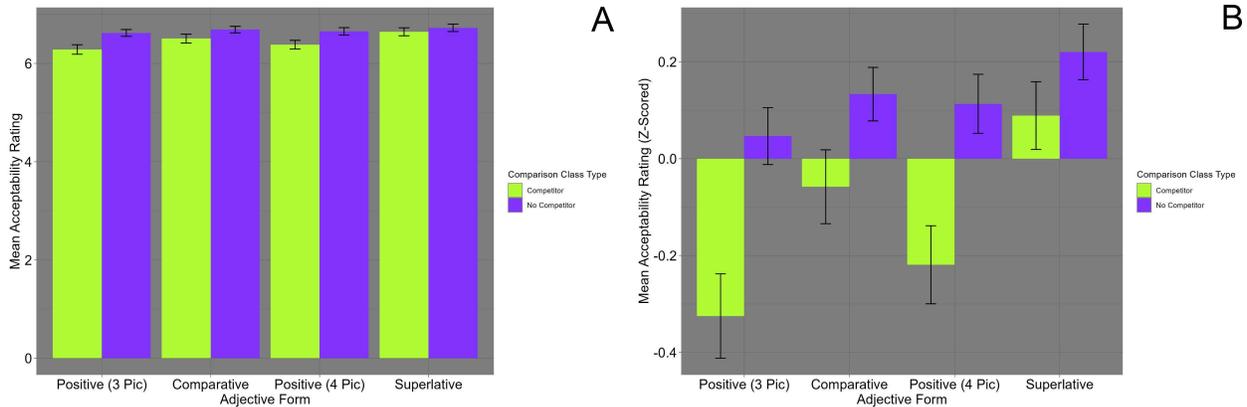
Figure 2. **A:** Exp1 Mean Acceptability Ratings; **B:** Exp1 Normed Mean Acceptability Ratings.

References:

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