

Finding more in 'most': Scientific study of an everyday word

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William Shakespeare, who knew a thing or two about words, advised that "An honest tale speeds best, being plainly told." But the exact meaning of plain language isn't always easy to find. Even simple words like "most" and "least" can vary greatly in definition and interpretation, and are difficult to put into precise numbers.

Until now. In a groundbreaking new linguistic study, Prof. Mira Ariel of Tel Aviv University's Department of Linguistics has quantified the meaning of the common word "most." To be published by the renowned Cambridge University Press this year in *Defining Pragmatics*, this research "is quite shocking for the linguistics world," she says.

"I'm looking at the nature of language and communication and the boundaries that exist in our conventional linguistic codes," says Prof. Ariel. "If I say to someone, 'I've told you 100 times not to do that,' what does '100 times' really mean? I intend to convey 'a lot,' not literally '100 times.' Such interpretations are contextually determined and can change over time."

Exploring the simple word "most," Prof. Ariel was able to use science to solve a central conundrum in the linguistics field.

What do we mean by "most"?

Academic linguists have traditionally agreed that when we use the word

"most" in English, we usually mean anything from 51 to 99 percent of given group of people or collection of objects. "Some linguists have argued that the word 'most' includes the 100% value as well, and that the meaning of 'most' is identical to that of 'more than half.' My study has proved them wrong," says Prof. Ariel.

Working with 60 volunteers from English-speaking countries including Australia, Britain and America, Prof. Ariel and her research team presented each candidate with a [dialogue](#) which included a reference to 'most', then asked them to choose an appropriate response (one out of two provided for them). "We didn't directly ask them about how they interpreted the word 'most,' but based on the preferred responses, we were able to draw conclusions regarding the classical theory in the field."

When people use the word "most," the study found, they don't usually mean the whole range of 51-99%. The common interpretation is much narrower, understood as a measurement of 80 to 95% of a sample -- whether that sample is of people in a room, cookies in a jar, or witnesses to an accident.

Prof. Ariel cautions that 80-95% is valid today but could shift over the next 100 years, for example.

A "most" interesting product of democracy

"That's the nature of [language](#) and [communication](#). It changes in the span of a few centuries," Prof. Ariel says, as words evolve over time. "'Most' as a word came to mean 'majority' only recently. Before democracy, we had feudal lords, kings and tribes, and the notion of 'most' referred to who had the lion's share of a given resource — 40%, 30% or even 20%," she explains.

"Today, 'most' clearly has come to signify a majority -- any number over

50 out of a hundred. But it wasn't always that way. A two-party democracy could have introduced the new idea that 'most' is something more than 50%."

In law, the precise interpretation of individual [words](#) is critical — it can win or lose a criminal or civil suit. In a recent court case, Prof. Ariel recalled, a couple ordered a red car, only to be delivered a burgundy car by the dealer. The dealer refused to take it back, arguing that burgundy is a shade of red. The court ruled against the couple because burgundy is indeed "red" in literal terms. But in this specific case, Prof. Ariel reasons, the court wasn't fair. It ruled against the couple's, and most people's, expectations of the color of a red car.

Whether one car is redder than another is clearly a matter of debate. But Dr. Ariel's study proves that when we use linguistic abstractions, we may be more precise than we think — that is, most (80-95%) of the time.

Source: Tel Aviv University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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