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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Development and Validation of the Facial Expression Intensity Stimulus Set (FEISS)

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0gt5r8df

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 46(0)

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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed

States overlap: Evidence from complement and relative clause comprehension

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Abstract

Just as we intuitively know that "chair" and "boy" denote referents in different categories, we know that "standing" falls into a different category from "walking": One of the events is static, the other dynamic. In three self-paced reading experiments, we show that such differences in event dynamicity leads to expectations about the temporal structure of complex events. We replicate and extend Gennari (2004): Participants read complement (Exp.1) and relative clause constructions (Exp.2,3) in which the event type in the subordinate clause (i.e., event/state) and temporal proximity between main and subordinate clause situations (i.e., close/overlap vs. distant/non-overlap) were manipulated. Consistent with Gennari (2004), we find evidence that people expect states to overlap (Exp.1,2), but only when in line with their expectation that states should happen first in time (Exp.3). Our results support a multifactorial model of language comprehension in which event structure is central to the formation of temporal expectations.