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Linguistic aspect constrains event apprehension

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Abstract

This study addresses the interaction between language and event cognition. Previous research has shown that viewers follow perceptual and conceptual features of event structure, and these features influence how they process events. Here, we examine whether events are processed in different ways when preceded by descriptions that contrast in lexical aspect. In our experiment, viewers watched fifteen short movie clips and were asked to indicate whether they saw an interruption. Interruptions occurred in either the midpoint or the late point of the events. We found that telic vs. atelic sentences shown prior to the movie clips influenced event construal and hence the detection of interruptions at midpoints vs. endpoints. This novel finding supports a mapping between lexical aspect in language and temporal structure-building in event apprehension. Our study provides direct experimental evidence for the role of language as a top-down conceptual cue in event processing.

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