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Accessibility of Agent and Patient roles is shaped by context

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Abstract

Adults represent events through abstract roles: e.g., when Jim eats chocolate, Jim is an "Agent" and the chocolate a "Patient." These roles are thought to be universally prominent across languages (Strickland, 2016). Nonetheless, learning to sort pictures into Agent and Patient categories is difficult for some individuals (Rissman & Lupyan, 2022). Which contexts affect the accessibility of these roles to explicit reasoning? Across two pre-registered experiments, English-speaking adults viewed pictures of an Agent acting on a Patient (e.g., one person kicking another). In each picture, a red dot marked either the Agent or the Patient. In one condition, participants freely sorted the pictures into two categories. In another condition, the pictures were accompanied by a nonsense verb marked with the suffix -ja or -ka. In both experiments, participants in the language condition were significantly more likely to sort by the Agent/Patient distinction, suggesting that language makes abstract roles more accessible.