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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2f65c2x6>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 42(0)

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Publication Date

2020

Peer reviewed

Do Language Effects on Attention Persist in Complex Task Contexts?

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Abstract

Is the influence of language on attention previously found in controlled, single-task lab contexts reduced or absent when other factors (i.e. goals) influence attention, as in everyday life? The current studies examined whether language effects on eye-movements and recall emerge in richer task conditions. Experiment 1 examined English speakers use of agentive/non-agentive language during scene description on memory for the agent, similar to Fausey and Boroditsky (2011) while altering scene complexity and adding eye-tracking. Experiment 2 contrasted the standard describe task with one more typical of everyday scene processing: predicting what happens next. Eye-tracking results from Experiment 1 support an influence of language on distribution of attention. However, the absence of a significant memory difference in both experiments suggests that the language effect is not robust enough to have a meaningful impact on memory in rich task conditions. Ultimately, the data suggested even the original effects are difficult to obtain.