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Language-modulated Internal and External Event Segmentation

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Languages differ in encoding object-state changes, influencing how speakers segment dynamic events. English and Mandarin diverge lexically (quantized nouns and resultative constructions) and phrasally (telicity representation). This study examined whether these differences modulate internal segmentation (detecting interruptions within an event) and external segmentation (marking event boundaries) of cutting (more bounded) and blending (less bounded) events.

In Experiment 1, English speakers highlighted initial states via quantized nouns, while Mandarin speakers emphasized end states using resultative constructions. Phrasally, English—but not Mandarin—showed a telic/atelic split between cutting and blending events. Experiment 2 revealed that English speakers detected early-stage interruptions in blending events more accurately, while Mandarin speakers excelled at later stages, mirroring lexical biases. In Experiment 3, English speakers marked cutting event boundaries faster, aligning with their telic phrasal framing.

Converging evidence suggests language systematically modulates event segmentation at multiple levels. Priming paradigms are discussed for establishing causality.