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Cognitive signatures of aspectual coercion

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Abstract

Aspectual coercion occurs when there is a semantic mismatch between constituents in terms of their lexical aspect. If people fully commit to an aspectual alternative (telic or atelic), one should see the reflections of this shift in their behavior. Here we introduce a new paradigm that can reliably detect how (and whether) comprehenders process aspectual coercion to commit to an aspectual alternative as they inspect the referential world of dynamic events. In two experiments, viewers watched short movie clips and were asked to indicate whether they saw an interruption. Interruptions occurred at either the midpoint or the endpoint of the events. Telic vs. atelic sentences with and without coercion were shown prior to the movie clips. Of interest was whether processing the sentences would influence event construal and hence the detection of interruptions at midpoints vs. endpoints. Our findings reveal cognitive signatures of aspectual coercion in how comprehenders inspect the visual world of events.