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Effects of global discourse coherence on local contextual predictions

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Abstract

During language comprehension, words are easier to process when predictable based on local sentence context. It is unclear how information available from the global discourse interacts with this local predictive processing. To test this, we conducted an online self-paced reading study (n=100), manipulating the predictability of a critical word in a target sentence while varying the coherency of the target sentence with a preamble context that preceded it. We found that people processed the critical word faster when it was highly predictable from local context, replicating a common finding. We also found people were slower to process the critical word when the target sentence was presented in an incoherent context. However, no interaction was observed. Results indicate that subtler semantic changes, such as topic shifts, slow language processing but do not reduce the benefit of a highly predictable, local context.