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Effects of lifetime knowledge on language processing in German and English

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Abstract

In two self-paced reading experiments, we investigated the integration of knowledge about cultural figures during language processing. Experiment 1 investigated how contextually-defined lifetime information (dead/alive) was integrated with temporal verb morphology (English Present Perfect and Past Simple). Experiment 2 investigated how long-term knowledge about a cultural figure, prompted by their picture, is integrated with two types of linguistic input in German: temporal phrases containing a year, and biographical information (e.g., Joaquin Phoenix: "In the year 2013 / "1960, I starred in the film 'Her' / "Psycho"). Experiment 1 revealed longer reading times and higher rejection rates when life status mismatched tense (i.e., dead – Present Perfect, alive – Past Simple). In Experiment 2, shorter reading times and higher accuracy rates emerged in conditions containing lifetime-year mismatches. No effects were found for biographical information violations. Together, the two experiments provide cross-linguistic evidence that knowledge of a referent’s lifetime is integrated during language processing.