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Authors
Simovic, Tiana
Chambers, Craig

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Pronoun interpretation in the context of dynamic actions: a test of the reinstatement hypothesis

Tiana Simovic
University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Craig Chambers
University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Pronouns (she, they) are semantically underspecified and depend on context for interpretation. One proposal is that interpretation occurs by reactivating a pronouns antecedent, consistent with memory reinstatement models. We evaluate this account using a novel task where the semantics of the antecedent are no longer appropriate after an instruction is completed (e.g., Move the house on the left to area 3, where the result is that ANOTHER house is now the leftmost one). If antecedent semantics are activated when subsequently hearing a pronoun ("Now put it"), listeners should experience confusion regarding the intended referent. However, measures of (i) the object selected, (ii) mouse-click reaction times, and (iii) eye-movements all demonstrate the pronoun is effortlessly linked to the previously-mentioned object, regardless of whether antecedent semantics are still relevant. This demonstrates that pronouns have indexical meaning, denoting a focused referent directly, and are not mediated by activating linguistic antecedents in discourse memory.