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The influence of temporal order on the recognition of causal relations

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Abstract: Fenker, Waldmann, & Holyoak (2005) found that participants are faster to recognize a causal relation between words presented in predictive (cause first) than in diagnostic order (effect first). We extended these findings to a comparison of abstract and concrete word pairs. Causality may play a more prominent role in abstract concept relations. Given that causally related abstract concepts are not always observable, they may often involve diagnostic reasoning (e.g. inferring motives). Across two experiments, participants made timed judgments of whether abstract and concrete word pairs of equal bidirectional associative strength were causally related. Items were presented in blocks comprising pairs in either predictive or diagnostic order. Reaction times were significantly lower for predictive order compared to diagnostic. This was not moderated by abstractness, but there was a slightly greater effect for concrete pairs. These data indicate that causal relations are likely stored in memory for both abstract and concrete concepts.