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Exploring links between attention and sentence production: The role of cue types and individual variation

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Abstract

Speakers commonly produce active sentences when asked to describe visual scenes depicting an agent acting on a patient. However, when the patient is in the center of attention (e.g., by means of a visual cue preceding the patient), speakers are more likely to produce passive constructions. To elucidate the impact of cue type and individual variation, we asked German-speaking participants to describe transitive event scenes. Participants were presented with one of three different cue types: a short attentional cue preceding the patient, a long attentional cue, or a pre-view of the patient (referential cue). We found that different cue types differently modulated speakers' propensity to produce passives. Critically, referential cueing was more effective than attentional cueing in increasing German speakers' rate of passive production, contra to what has previously been demonstrated for English speakers. At the same time, we observed quite substantial individual variation in speakers' aptitude to produce passives.