Processing discourse referents in Mandarin active and passive SOV sentences

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Introduction

Mandarin Chinese is a SVO-language. The default is that NP1 encodes agents and NP2 encodes patients or themes. However, SOV is also possible, by use of markers. Frequent are bêi, which yields a passive, and bài, which yields an active resultative construction. The mapping of conceptual roles to linear positions is exactly opposite in the bài- and in the bêi-construction (bài: Agent → NP2; bêi: Agent → NP1).

How does information derived from these two markers affect the interpretation of preceding, and the prediction of following referents? We employed a visual world study in which we manipulate animacy of referents following the markers (Kamide et al. 2003).

Hypotheses:

Referent prediction: animate referents should be predicted more in the bài-condition than inanimate referents in the bêi-condition (Li et al. 1993).

Referent interpretation: more attention to referents preceding markers, if initial role assignment in passives (NP1 before marker = agent) is revised (Huang et al. 2013); no difference, if role assignment awaits info from markers.

Participants: 28 Mandarin native speakers; students at Heidelberg University; low to medium knowledge of German

Materials: Sentence pairs (N=16) with identical beginnings (NP1), but different continuations were created: in the bêi-condition (passive) an animate, in the bài-condition (active) an inanimate referent followed NP1:zhè gōu chī hǎi de qǐ zǐ bì dà nǐ hâng jà le This chef’s wife (by the) gangster kidnapped
zhè gōu chī hǎi de qǐ zǐ bǐ bâ fô châ le This chef’s wife (the) coffee made

Filler items (N=16) were similar to critical items, but nouns mentioned after bêi/bài were never present in the visual display.

Only one pair partner per list, 8 from each condition (all fillers). Trials were randomized.

Method

Task: Listen to sentences. After each trial participants had to give a yes/no answer to a question testing event structure comprehension.

Results

Discussion

Evidence for prediction:

As soon as information is derived from the markers, it is used to predict upcoming referents. This implies an event representation that at least specifies causal relations between entities before the following noun is perceived. However, since bêi is more constraining and, thus, more reliable than bài in terms of animacy features (cf. Li et al. 1993), Mandarin speakers are more likely to link a visual animate referent to the yet-to-be-filled agent slot in their event representation than they are to link an animate referent to a patient slot, or an inanimate referent to theme slot.

No evidence for revision of initial role assignment:

In both conditions, the nouns preceding the markers receive the same amount of attention after the markers are encountered. Thus, argument linking may be postponed until enough evidence is provided by the markers. This might be a temporal strategy induced by our design. If so, however, this can be interpreted as processing flexibility, which temporarily inhibits the general agent-first preference (cf. Li et al. 1993).

References


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