Spontaneous eye movements during passive spoken language comprehension reflect grammatical processing

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Abstract

Language is tightly connected to sensory and motor systems. Recent research using eye- tracking typically relies on constrained visual contexts, viewing a small array of objects on a computer screen. Some critiques of embodiment ask if people simply match their simulations to the pictures being presented. This study compared the comprehension of verbs with two different grammatical forms: the past progressive form (e.g., was walking), which emphasizes the ongoing nature of actions, and the simple past (e.g., walked), which emphasizes the end-state of an action. The results showed that the distribution and timing of eye movements mirrors the underlying conceptual structure of this linguistic difference in the absence of any visual stimuli. Thus, eye movement data suggest that visual inputs are unnecessary to solicit perceptual simulations.

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