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Citation for published version:
Chow, WY & Sturt, P 2017, ‘Predictive pressures do not override the effects of verb bias in syntactic parsing’ CUNY Sentence Processing Conference, Boston, United States, 31/03/17, .

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Predictive pressures do not override the effects of verb bias in syntactic parsing

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INTRODUCTION

Syntactic parsing is sensitive to

• predictive pressures (e.g., to complete an open dependency) [1]
• subcategory frequency information (e.g., how often a given verb takes a direct object vs. a sentential complement, aka verb bias) [2]

Reinterpretation of Past Findings[3-4]

Garden path effects in sentences like (1) were taken to show reanalysis is the parser’s last resort [5]

1) “The government officials who accepted (that) the expensive gift had caused a scandal were quick to turn it away.”

But these results may also be taken to show comprehenders face predictive pressures to complete an open dependency asap (by interpreting “had caused a scandal” as the main clause predicate).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Question: Can the predictive pressure to complete an open S-V dependency override the effects of verb bias?

Past findings suggested it cannot [6], but participants may not have pursued a DO reading in SC-biased materials for independent reasons (e.g., implausibility of DO readings).

METHODS

We examined the effects of verb bias x ambiguity in sentences with low vs. high predictive pressures.

Low predictive pressure (Experiment 1A):

DO-bias: The policeman saw (that) the protesters/ had entered/ the plaza/ and was keeping a watchful eye on the situation.

SC-bias: The judge doubted (that) the witnesses/ could resist/ bribery/ and was calling for an investigation.

High predictive pressure (Experiment 1B):

DO-bias: The policeman who saw (that) the protesters/ had entered/ the plaza/ was keeping/ a watchful eye on the situation.

SC-bias: The judge who doubted (that) the witnesses/ could resist/ bribery/ was calling/ for an investigation.

• Experiments 1A & 1B were run in a single session with the same set of participants (n=22, 48 items).
• We quantify verb bias using a SC-DO ratio [6]
• 12 DO-biased verbs (<0.5), e.g., accept, hear, establish, read
• 12 SC-biased verbs (>2), e.g., argue, decide, realize, conclude
• The materials were normed to ensure that all readings (SC, DO, high and low attachments) are plausible.

HYPOTHESES AND PREDICTIONS

Experiment 1A: Based on previous results we expect to see a greatly reduced garden-path effect in SC-biased conditions than in DO-biased conditions.

Experiment 1B:

• If the predictive pressure to complete the main clause S-V dependency can override the effects of verb bias
  – a garden-path effect regardless of verb bias
• If predictive pressure alone cannot override the effects of verb bias
  – a reduced garden-path effect in SC-biased conditions (as in Experiment 1A)

RESULTS

Experiment 1A (Low predictive pressure):

Summary
In both experiments, we observed a main effect of ambiguity in the critical region, which was followed by a verb-bias x ambiguity interaction:
• Exp 1: total time in the critical region + regression path and total time in the post-critical region
• Exp 2: total time in the critical region

Experiment 1B (High predictive pressure):

• We replicated Garnsey et al.’s classic findings in eye-tracking in Experiment 1A, which validated our verb bias manipulation.
• The reduced garden-path effect in the SC bias condition in Experiment 1B suggests that comprehenders pursued an SC analysis even when
  i. the DO reading is highly plausible, and
  ii. pursuing a DO analysis would allow them to complete the main clause S-V dependency sooner.
• These results add to recent findings on the limits of predictive processing.[7]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Tszching Kong, Ryan Law, Shuyan Wang and Silvia Seminara for help with material development and data collection.

REFERENCES