

Broadening the agent preference hypothesis through experiencers: Eye-tracking and EEG evidence of proto-agents and proto-patients

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Despite the large number of proposed event roles, psycholinguistic evidence supports only two core knowledge categories with distinct processing correlates: agent and patient roles. This evidence aligns with the proto-role approach, which proposes only two proto-roles, proto-agent and proto-patient. Here, we investigate the processing correlates of arguments labeled as “experiencers” to determine whether they exhibit specific processing correlates, as agents and patients do, or whether they are subsumed under the proto-agent role category, sharing similar processing correlates with agents and differing from patients. We conducted both eye-tracking and EEG reading tasks, in which Spanish speakers were instructed to read intransitive sentences with either agent, experiencer, or patient subjects. In eye-tracking, agents and experiencers elicited longer fixation times and regression counts than patients, in both the verb and post-verb regions. In EEG, we replicated the known N400 component associated with processing patients compared to agents. Crucially, this N400 effect was also observed when comparing patients to experiencers. Additionally, patients revealed a power increase in the theta band compared to agents and experiencers, and a power decrease in the low-beta band. These findings replicate previous results supporting a transient preference for agents in language comprehension and suggest that experiencers align with agents in this regard, providing further evidence for the proto-role approach.