

When Agents and Themes Aren't Enough: Investigating the Experiencer Role in Basque

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Argument structure and event roles play a central role in linguistic theory. However, experimental evidence for their processing correlates remains limited—except for two core roles: agents and themes. General findings suggest agents are preferred and easier processed over themes across languages, modalities, and developmental stages (Rissman & Majid, 2019). Psycholinguistic and cognitive science evidence aligns with the listing of a few (prototypical) event roles (Dowty, 1991). My main objective is to advance our understanding of how event roles map onto syntactic structures during sentence processing. I focus on the experiencer role in Basque, where it can appear in subject and object positions and bear Ergative/Absolutive/Dative case. While this role has been experimentally studied in SVO nominative-accusative languages (Bornkessel et al., 2003; Bourguignon et al., 2012; Kyriaki et al., 2020; Paczynski & Ruperberg, 2011), findings remain inconclusive. Examining Basque, an SOV ergative language with rich morphology, allows us to assess the influence of syntactic versus morphological cues on experiencer processing, while avoiding some of the caveats of previous studies. The main questions are:

Q1) Are there distinct processing correlates for agent, theme, and experiencer roles shared across languages?

Q2) Do these correlates vary depending on the predicate's argument structure?

Q3) What cues support role identification, and how are they weighted?

The objective of the presentation is to share the project and receive feedback, especially regarding the first experiment.