

Testing the agent preference within intransitives in Basque

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A well-known strategy in the online comprehension of language is the so-called subject preference: speakers or listeners interpret sentence-initial ambiguous arguments as the subject of the clause. The first studies that provided evidence for this preference were conducted with English and German speakers (Matzke et al. 2002, Ferreira 2003) and similar results were thereafter replicated in typologically more diverse languages (Demiral et al. 2008, Erdocia et al. 2009, Wang et al. 2009, Bickel et al. 2015). Despite this extensive body of literature, it is not clear what exactly the subject preference is or where it derives from. Most of the cited studies have used non-canonical, usually object-initial sentences in comparison to canonical sentences, and thus the subject preference cannot be easily untangled from other factors such as word order. In the present study, we aim to isolate the effect of semantic role in the subject preference. To do so, we focus on intransitive sentences in Basque (cf. Martinez de la Hidalga et al. 2019) and we compare the interpretation of case-ambiguous initial NPs that disambiguate toward agent (SergV) or undergoer (SabsV) roles at the verb position in the sentence. We record electrophysiological activity while participants read sentences and we analyze event-related potentials at the disambiguating verb position. Data collection is currently ongoing (N=29) but preliminary results suggest that speakers interpret ambiguous initial NPs as the agent rather than the undergoer.

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