

EEG evidence on the agent preference in Basque
(Arrate Isasi-Isasmendi, University of Zurich)

Abstract: Comprehenders across languages tend to interpret role-ambiguous arguments as the subject or the agent of a sentence during parsing. However, the evidence for such a subject/agent preference builds on the comprehension of transitive, active-voice sentences where agents/subjects canonically precede patients/objects. The evidence is thus potentially confounded by the canonical order of arguments. Transitive sentence stimuli additionally conflate the semantic agent role and the syntactic subject function. We designed an experiment to resolve these two confounds by using intransitive sentences in Basque. When exposed to sentence-initial role-ambiguous arguments, we found that comprehenders preferentially interpreted these as agents and had to revise their interpretation when the verb disambiguated to patient-initial readings. The revision was reflected in an N400 component in ERPs and event-related desynchronisation (ERD) in the alpha and lower-beta bands. In my presentation, I will discuss these results in line with the agent preference and I will also discuss how ERP and ERD effects are related. Finally, I will outline ongoing work investigating the development of the agent preference as a processing mechanism.