

Preferences for the positioning of actants in visual scenes

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The goal of this study was to determine whether language users have a preference for the visual representation of events that can be expressed using transitive action verbs. We examined whether there is a preference for agents depicted to the left or to the right of patients in scenes containing both (e.g., a boxer pushing a thief).

Thirty-six native speakers of German (mean age 24.2 years, $SD = 1.8$) took part in the study. Participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that consisted of 9 items, each containing two mirror images of the same scene. The scenes depicted 9 events between two animate figures (see Figure 1). For each item participants were asked to mark with a cross the picture they preferred (i.e., the one that – in their opinion – looked more conventional, natural or better) or the option “I have no preference”.

The results show that overall left-agent preference occurred significantly more often than both right-agent preference and no preference, and right-agent preference occurred more often than no preference. While the results suggest that participants generally prefer the scenes where the agent is positioned to the left of the patient, this preference was reverse for some scenes. Thus, for the event *ziehen* ‘pull’ participants showed a significant preference for the agent depicted to the right of the patient.

The findings show that in general agents to the left of patients are preferred even in nonverbal tasks. This left-agent preference is in line with that reported in previous literature on verbal tasks (e.g., Chatterjee, Southwood & Basilico, 1999). However, just like in verbal tasks, these representations appear to be influenced by the directionality of events, since the pictures depicting events with directionality dissociation (i.e., *ziehen* ‘pull’ where the action affecting the patient is directed away from it) elicited a clear right-agent preference. These findings have important implications especially for studies on prominence with event representations and event structure at the core of their design, as non-verbal preferences may be a potential confound that needs to be carefully considered when experimental stimuli are constructed.

Keywords: event, preferences, visual scenes

Figure 1.

