

Learning non-causal transitive verbs

Many researchers suggest a Privileged Link between the transitive construction and caused events (e.g., Naigles, 1990). However, transitive syntax is used for a range of events, and we know little about how non-causal transitive verbs are acquired.

Transitive emotion verbs come in two types: experiencer-object (Sally frightened/delighted Mary) and experiencer-subject (Sally feared/liked Mary). Pesetsky (1995) proposes that experiencer-object verbs describe caused events whereas experiencer-subject verbs do not. Confirming Pesetsky's analysis, twenty adults judged the cause of the emotion described by experiencer-object verbs to be the verb's subject but were unsure as to whether there was any cause of the emotion was for experiencer-subject verbs. Out of 258 English emotion verbs, this effect was significant for 90% of the experiencer-object verbs and 95% of the experiencer-subject verbs.

On the Privileged Link hypothesis, one might expect children who are just beginning to acquire emotion verbs would acquire experiencer-object verbs, which follow the Privileged Link, more quickly than experiencer-subject verbs, which do not. Indeed, 4-5yos, who are just beginning to acquire emotion verbs know more experiencer-object verbs (Hartshorne et al., in press). However, this could reflect the input, not the capacity to learn.

4-5yos were presented with two low-frequency experiencer-subject (envy, pity) or two low-frequency experiencer-object (disgust, encourage) verbs, disguised by using novel labels (gorfin, wixter). Experiencer-object verbs were described with causal language, and experiencer-subject verbs, with non-causal language. In the disgust trial, children were read a story in which Birdie experiences gorfin about Rhino, and Lion experiences gorfin about Birdie (Figure 1). The child was then asked who Birdie gorfins. The child who says "Lion" has assigned experiencer-object syntax to gorfin; the child who says "Rhino," experiencer-subject syntax. Children preferred experiencer-object syntax for caused emotions and experiencer-subject syntax for uncaused emotions ($ps < .05$), showing they could learn either pattern equally well.

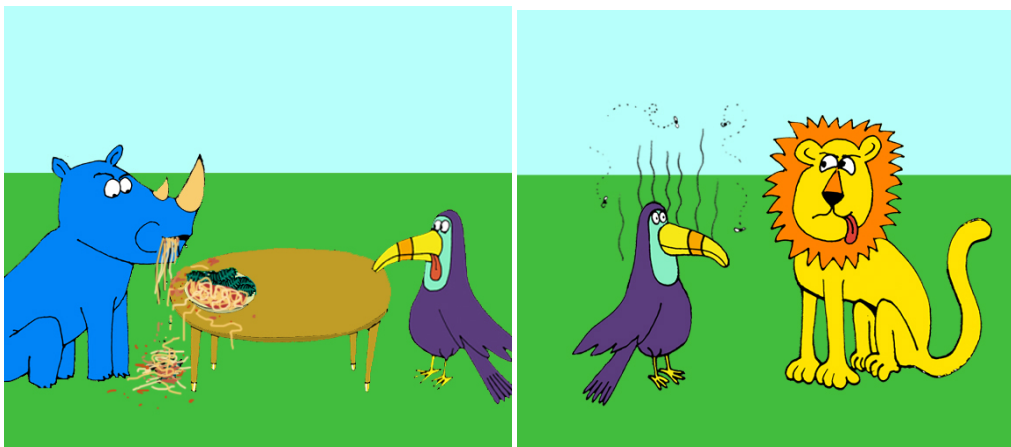


Figure 1.

References

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