Abstract:

It can be argued that transitive verbs are central in constructing clauses. For instance, the (semantic) structure of typical action events is agent/cause–change of state–patient, which also constitutes the basis for transitive constructions. Moreover, semantically motivated transitive constructions serve as the model for clausal constructions both in formal and in functional theories of syntax. The centrality of this construction is also seen in that it is ‘coerced’ (= ‘recruited’) to encode other kinds of events as well. For example, emotional events and even states (experiencer–event/state–reason/stimulus) are frequently encoded as transitive constructions. Finally, it has been argued that the transitive construction is crucial in language development (Tomasello, 2003). Psycholinguistic studies have produced mixed results as to whether transitive or intransitive verbs are easier to process. Some studies suggest that transitive constructions are easier to process (e.g., van Dam & Desai 2016), but also opposite results have been reported (e.g., den Ouden, Fix, Parrish, & Thompson, 2009; Kauschke & Stenneken; 2008). Yet another set of studies have failed to find any differences in processing time between transitive and intransitive constructions (e.g., Rayner & Duffy, 1986). In the present study, we set out to study whether morphological marking of verb (in)transitivity influences the online processing of transitive vs. intransitive constructions. In order to do so, we pitted Finnish morphologically marked transitive and intransitive verbs (i.e. causatives, such as uudi-st-a-a ‘to make new’, and anticausatives, such as uudi-st-u-a ‘to become new’) against verbs without any corresponding morphological marking. We were also interested in how quickly (in)transitivity information encoded by the verb is utilized during online sentence processing. To that end, we registered readers’ eye movements when they read single sentences silently for comprehension. The list of the target words consisted of 44 verbs for which (in)transitivity was marked morphologically (= derivationally) and 40 either transitive or intransitive verbs (= ‘lexical’ verbs) without any explicit marking. The transitive and intransitive verbs were, respectively, agentive and non-agentive in nature. Twenty-eight speakers of Finnish (university students) participated in the experiment. –The talk will discuss the results of this experiment.

References:


