

Verb Aspect, Event Structure, and Pronoun Interpretation: An ERP Investigation

TODD R. FERRETTI, Wilfrid Laurier University,
HANNAH ROHDE, University of California, San Diego,
MELANIE CRUTCHLEY, Wilfrid Laurier University,
ANDREW KEHLER, University of California, San Diego

We investigated the interpretation of pronouns following sentences containing transfer-of-possession verbs marked with either imperfective or perfective aspect (e.g., *Amanda was shifting/had shifted some poker chips to Scott. He/She counted the stack*). The second sentence described a plausible subsequent event. Following perfective sentences, pronouns with a source referent elicited brain potentials that were more negative at left anterior locations than pronouns with a goal referent, and such pronouns also elicited more positive amplitudes at posterior locations (consistent with a P600 or “SPS”). Following imperfective verbs, source pronouns elicited greater anterior negativity than goal pronouns, but this effect had broader distribution and a later onset than in the perfective condition. These results are consistent with recent research showing that pronouns are preferentially interpreted to refer to the goal when occasion coherence relations are used, and that this bias is greater for perfective than imperfective aspect.