Anticipating Upcoming Discourse Relations: Using Eye Movements To Measure Verb-Driven Pragmatic Expectations

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We investigated comprehenders' expectations regarding the pragmatic relationships that are inferred to hold between sentences. First, in an implicit-learning paradigm, comprehenders learned to associate one region of the visual field with Explanation relations (e.g., "Leo takes the bus to work. He doesn't have a car.") and another region with Occasion relations (e.g., "Melissa ran towards Trevor. They embraced."). Then, during a subsequent speeded-response task, we recorded comprehenders' eye movements to examine whether verb-driven contextual cues would bias expectations regarding upcoming discourse relations. We found more anticipatory looks to the Explanation region following implicit causality verbs ("Theo congratulated Miriam") and more looks to the Occasion region following transfer-of-possession verbs ("Heather bounced a basketball to Josh"). This is consistent with evidence for expectation-driven processing *within* the sentence (at the level of sounds, words, and syntactic structures) and extends that work to show that comprehenders also anticipate pragmatic relationships *between* sentences during processing.