

Reference, Telicity, and Information Structure

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Previous story-continuation studies (Rohde *et al.* 2006, 2008) report variation in referential biases based on telicity in transfer contexts with canonical word order: Telic contexts realized with perfectives trigger a goal bias; atelic contexts realized with imperfectives trigger a source bias.

1. Joel delivered_{PERFECTIVE}/was delivering_{IMPERFECTIVE} flowers to Mark.

Such variation has been captured with a coherence-driven account based on telicity: The goal argument (Mark in (1)) is more likely to be re-mentioned when the event is described as completed, particularly in continuations providing subsequent/consequential information, whereas the source argument (Joel in (1)) is more likely to be re-mentioned when the event is described as ongoing, particularly in continuations providing explanatory/elaborative information (Kehler *et al.* 2008). The present study investigates the status of these referential biases when the telic/atelic distinction is neutralized, i.e. in the context of VP inversion, a noncanonical word order with a marked information structure:

2. After the corporate take-over, everyone was eager to please the new bosses, with some going so far as to buy them presents. *Delivering flowers to the CFO Mark Johnson was the Head of Accounting Joel Sherman.*

As noted by Birner (1992) and Birner & Ward (1998), inversion imposes an information-structural constraint on its use: The postposed constituent is reserved for information that is relatively less familiar than that represented by the preverbal constituent. Inversion could therefore serve as a cue that the postverbal constituent represents new information, influencing subsequent patterns of reference. If referential biases are sensitive to this constraint, the relatively familiar status of the preverbal constituent could favor subsequent reference to the associated entity as the ongoing discourse topic. Alternatively, the relatively unfamiliar status of the postverbal constituent could signal a new topic, thus favoring reference to that entity. However, given the strong preference for a telic interpretation for VP inversion (Birner & Ward 1992), a goal bias might be hypothesized to emerge, as previously reported with perfectives.

To investigate the relative contribution of telicity and information structure on reference, we conducted a story-continuation experiment, measuring source/goal bias following two-sentence story prompts like (2). The first sentence evokes both a source and goal argument, neither explicitly mentioned. The second describes a transfer-of-possession event using an imperfective (...*was delivering flowers*...), perfective (...*delivered flowers*...), or VP inversion (*Delivering flowers was*...). Our results show the source bias to be higher for imperfectives than perfectives ($t(29) = 2.079$, $p < 0.05$), replicating previous work. The source bias was highest, however, for inversion ($t(29) = 2.269$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that the information status associated with postverbal position in inversion redirects the discourse to the referent of that constituent, thereby disconfirming the hypothesis that the telic interpretation associated with VP inversion would result in the same goal bias found for perfectives in canonical word order. Building on previous studies that have demonstrated the effect of word order on referent prominence (Gordan & Chan 1995, Foraker & McElree 2007), this study shows that inversion imposes information-structural constraints that trigger different referential biases than the argument-structural constraints imposed by canonical word order.

References

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