

Tracing the implicit causality bias in corpora – A case study

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Experimental psycholinguists have studied the so-called implicit causality (IC) continuation bias for more than 40 years and have mostly attributed it to an effect of argument structure of a verb on subsequent anaphor resolution. Typical examples of IC verbs express a causal relation between an event or state (the “stimulus” argument), and an attitude (the “experiencer” argument), and link these roles to different syntactic functions (subject vs. object). In the typical experiment on the implicit causality bias, participants are asked to complete sentence fragments of the form: [argument₁ verb argument₂, *because* ...]. In their completions, participants show a strong tendency to interpret the anaphor as co-referring with the instigator of the event or state (the stimulus); most accounts attribute this effect to differences in salience between the arguments of the respective verbs.

The talk reports a corpus study on passive sentences for two classes of implicit causality verbs and puts the salience hypothesis to test. By taking into consideration a wider variety of contexts for IC verbs than usually employed in experiments, we want to scrutinize the ecological validity of the experimental results. From a more general point of view, the aim of the talk is to exemplify how results from different methodological approaches (e.g., experiment, corpus) can be brought to bear on our understanding of a grammatical phenomenon.