

Processing obviation and voice in Border Lakes Ojibwe

Transitive sentences with two animate third persons (VTAs) are understood by combining the obviation status of the two nouns with the direct/inverse marking on the verb. With direct marking, proximate is acting on obviative; with inverse, the relationship is reversed. In this study, I look at how these two sources of information are put together in real-time sentence comprehension with a preferential looking study. 16 first speakers of Border Lakes Ojibwe listened to relative clause (RC) sentences, which differed in whether the head noun of the RC was proximate versus obviative, and whether the voice marking on the conjunct RC verb was direct versus inverse. The task was to figure which of three possible images displayed on a touchscreen matched the meaning of the sentence. While the sentence was playing, a web-camera recorded which image the participant was looking towards. Using these recordings, the incremental interpretation of the sentence could be established as new information from obviation and voice came into play.

We found that participants assume that proximate nouns will be the agent of the action, prior to voice giving evidence of the actual argument structure relationships. In contrast, obviative nouns were not preferred as either the agent or the patient prior to voice being encountered. Following the disambiguating information from voice, the two major findings were: (i) RCs with proximate heads were more accurately interpreted than those with obviative heads; (ii) RCs where the head ended up being the agent (i.e. direct voice with a proximate head; inverse voice with an obviative head) were more accurate than sentences where the head ended up in the patient role. I connect these results to broader theories of “filler-gap” dependency processing and the structure of conjunct order clauses in Ojibwe.