

EFFECTS OF EVENT SIMILARITY AND STRUCTURE PREFERENCE ON SYNTACTIC CHOICES IN SENTENCE PRODUCTION

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Abstract: Language is commonly used in a certain context, e.g., conversation. Under this context, speakers tend to talk about similar or related events and thus the conceptual similarity is often together with similarity in linguistic structures, resulting in a semantic boost effect of structure priming. However, structure priming effects are also modulated by language-specific bias, e.g., structure preference. For example, the less preferred structures are primed only in the identical event (verb repetition) condition, but not in dissimilar event condition. Events like the two-character simple transitive ones can be described in SOV/OSV sentences in Mandarin, such as the preferred active *ba*-constructions and passive *bei*-constructions as well as the less preferred passive *gei*-constructions.

This study aims to investigate whether event similarity can have an effect on speaker's syntactic choice and if yes, whether the effect can be modulated by structure preference. In three structural priming experiments, native Chinese speakers describe pictures of simple transitive events after repeating sentences printed on the top of prime pictures. The prime pictures were manipulated to have identical, similar or dissimilar events with the targets. In each experiment, half of the prime sentences were presented in active SVO constructions and another half were in active SOV *ba*-constructions (Experiment 1), passive SOV *bei*-constructions (Experiment 2) and passive SOV *gei*-constructions (Experiment 3), respectively.

The results showed speakers repeated the primed structures more often in identical and similar event condition than in dissimilar condition when the primes were preferred constructions (Experiment 1 and Experiment 2), but for the primes including less preferred constructions (Experiment 3), the semantic boost effect was only obtained in the identical event condition but not in the similar event condition. These results demonstrate that event similarity can have an effect on the structure choice in formulation. Chinese speakers also tend to use the same syntactic structures more often when they are exposed to similar events. However, the semantic boost of structural priming is also modulated by structure preference in Chinese, suggesting certain language-specific constraints can play an important role in spoken sentence choices.

Keywords: sentence production, event similarity, syntactic choice, structural priming