Event-based Thematic Role Concepts

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There are considerable differences among researchers' conceptions of the semantic content of verbs' thematic roles. In many theories, semantic content is limited to (grammatically-relevant) binary selectional restrictions such as ±animacy. In some theories, researchers allow for selectional restrictions of many types, such as ±mailable, ±cookable, or ±inflatable. The notion of selectional restrictions has played an important role in linguistics and psycholinguistics. One reason is that selectional restrictions are viewed as lexically-based, and therefore are assumed to be available to influence on-line language processing more rapidly than is knowledge about real-word events. In contrast, my colleagues and I have been investigating the idea that thematic roles are event-based concepts, and that thematic role assignment during on-line language comprehension reflects this. An event-based conceptual view of thematic processing has a number of implications. For example, it entails a dynamic view of thematic role assignment in which the fit between a verb's thematic role and a particular noun concept depends not only on the specific verb, but also on verb sense (or the class of events to which the verb refers given a particular context). As another example, from an expectancy generation point of view, verb aspect can influence expectancies for upcoming roles. I will present psycholinguistic studies that provide evidence for this view, including word-word priming, self-paced reading, eyetracking, and ERP experiments. These studies demonstrate that although there may be a distinction between lexical constraints on the one hand, and conceptual event-based knowledge on the other, this distinction has no relevance for the time course of the activation and use of these types of knowledge. Thus, there is no architecturally-determined delay of knowledge about real-world events during language comprehension. Furthermore, it appears that selectional restrictions, which are often considered to be lexical-grammatical constraints, and event-based knowledge, which is conceptual, may, in fact, be the same thing.