

Visual context and abstract language

A well-documented finding in psycholinguistic research is that visual context rapidly affects language comprehension (Tanenhaus et al. 1995). This finding has sparked numerous studies that have shown that non-linguistic visual information about entities and events inform language comprehension incrementally (e.g., Chambers et al., 2002; Knoeferle and Crocker 2005, 2007; Spivey et al., 2002). Complementary to this, embodied theories of language propose that perception and action processes are involved in language comprehension (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999). While existing studies have found strong evidence that perception and action co-contribute towards understanding concrete language, it's an open question whether this also holds for abstract language.

A referential link between language and visual information appears effortlessly when language describes objects and actions depicted visually. However, to which extent can we link visual context with more abstract language? Can non-linguistic visual information modulate abstract language in the absence of a referential mechanism?

This project can be studied for a BA or MA thesis. It will examine the extent to which non-referential aspects of visual context (e.g., spatial relations) can affect real-time comprehension of abstract sentences. It is an attempt to bridge between evidence coming from psycholinguistic and embodied language research on the role of perceptual processes in language comprehension. Using eye-tracking methodology, we will assess the effects of different perceptual structures (e.g., distance between objects) on reading times of abstract sentences.

If you'd like to hear more about the project before contacting Dr. Knoeferle, feel free to approach:

Ernesto Guerra

Gebäudeteil H, Raum 136

Email: ernesto.guerra@uni-bielefeld.de

Tel: +49 (0) 521-106-12 117