

How robust is the recent event preference?

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Previous eye tracking findings show that people preferentially direct their attention to the target of a recently depicted event compared with the target of a possible future event during the comprehension of a spoken sentence relating to the recent or future event (e.g., Abashidze, Knoeberle, Carminati, & Essig, 2011; Knoeberle & Crocker, 2007). This gaze pattern emerged even when the frequency of occurrence of future and recent events did not differ within the experiment, Knoeberle, Carminati, Abashidze, & Essig, 2011, Experiment 2). To further test the robustness of the recent event preference, the current studies introduced a frequency bias in favor of the future over the recent event (Experiment 1: 88% future vs. 12% past events in combination with future and past sentences; Experiment 2: 75% future vs. 25% past event). We found that increasing the frequency of the future event did result in earlier fixations to the target of the future event than previously observed (in Experiment 2 of Knoeberle, Carminati, Abashidze, & Essig, 2011). However, in the current studies we essentially replicated the same overall preference to look at the target of the recent event throughout sentence presentation. A memory test supported these results. Thus, within-experiment frequency appears to modulate the recent event preference to some extent, but cannot override it. We propose that an epistemic bias of the human mind favors assertions about past events over future ones.