

Salience in corpora? Scrutinizing the ecological validity of the so-called implicit causality bias

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Experimental psycholinguists have studied the so-called implicit causality continuation bias for more than forty years and have mostly attributed it to an effect of argument structure of a verb on subsequent anaphor resolution. Typical examples of implicit causality verbs express a causal relation between an event or state (the “stimulus” argument), and an attitude (the “experiencer” argument), and link these roles to different syntactic functions (subject vs. object). Numerous experimental studies have demonstrated that participants show a strong tendency to interpret an anaphor in a subsequent clause as co-referring with the instigator of the event or state (the stimulus) of the clause containing the implicit causality verb; most accounts attribute this effect to differences in salience between the arguments of the respective verbs. The talk reports a corpus study on passive sentences for two classes of implicit causality verbs and puts the salience hypothesis to test. By taking into consideration a wider variety of contexts for implicit causality verbs than usually employed in experiments, we want to scrutinize the ecological validity of the experimental results. From a more general point of view, the aim of the talk is to exemplify how results from different methodological approaches (e.g., experiment, corpus) can be brought to bear on our understanding of a grammatical phenomenon.