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Who is you? Delayed processing following (formal) second person pronouns in an emotional narrative

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Abstract

Texts about fictional characters are often written in a third person singular (3SG) perspective. In a self-paced reading study, Child et al. (2018) found that emotional information is processed more easily when the narrative uses second person singular (2SG) rather than 3SG. In the current study, we explore how 2SG and 3SG are processed in Dutch. Because Dutch is a language with a formal-informal distinction in 2SG, we also contrast formal 2SG-V (e.g., u 'you') to informal 2SG-T (e.g., jij 'you') forms. We find a main effect of perspective on target processing, with 2SG read faster than 3SG. In contrast, spillover regions (three words following the target) are read slower following 2SG than 3SG, and spillover regions were read slower following 2SG-V than following 2SG-T. This means that processing emotional narratives through a 2SG perspectives induces a processing cost compared to 3SG perspectives, and this increases with formal 2SG.

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