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Prototypicality and frequency do not necessarily affect children's sentence comprehension

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Abstract

Prototypicality and frequency have been assumed to play a critical role in children's sentence comprehension. However, Mandarin-speaking five-year-olds' comprehension of the SVO structure consisting of subject verb object, ba structure consisting of subject ba object verb, and bei structure consisting of subject bei object verb, all of which were plausible but contrasted with animacy, namely animate-animate (AA), animate-inanimate (AI), inanimate-animate (IA), and inanimate-inanimate (II) indicated that the prototypical AI combination did not surpass all the remaining patterns and the ba and bei structures with low frequencies did not necessarily result in worse performance. Animate noun phrases (NPs) did not always trump inanimate NPs to be agent/doer. Although five-year-olds' performance with the IA bei structure followed eADM's and good-enough representation's predictions, the ba structure's better comprehension in the AI and II conditions than any other structure suggests that arrangement of argument order may not be as prominent as those theories claimed.