

How listeners perceive verbs

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The verb forms the heart of a sentence. Although a lot of research has been done into the role that verbs play during the transfer of information, less is known about exactly how and when the listener or reader uses this information. Dutch researcher Dieuwke de Goede delved into this subject and investigated how the functioning of the verb is expressed when sentences are listened to.

The verb expresses an action or event described by the sentence and provides information about persons or objects involved in the event. To measure the assimilation of a verb in a sentence, De Goede asked more than 400 study subjects in eight different experiments to listen to about 120 spoken sentences per experiment.

Whilst listening they were shown words on a computer screen and they had to indicate whether or not these were real Dutch words. Half of the words were related in meaning to the verbs from the sentences to which the study subject was listening at that moment. At different points in the sentence, the study subjects were found to more quickly recognise verbs as genuine if these had a meaning related to the verbs in the sentences spoken. From this it was concluded that at these points in the sentence the verb was active.

The different experiments revealed a clear pattern: in complex Dutch sentences, consisting of a main clause followed by a secondary clause, the verb was activated until the end of the main clause. In other words, the meaning of the verb remains with the listener until the end of the main clause and subsequently disappears in the next clause.

The pattern of verb activation found differs considerably from the pattern that was found for nouns. For example, although a noun becomes active immediately after its use, this effect has virtually disappeared well before the end of the main clause. According to De Goede one reason for this is the fact that verbs nearly always have several meanings, whereas that is not the case for nouns. The exact meaning of a verb depends on the sentence context.

The research results emphasise the importance of the verb for understanding the sentence. Furthermore, De Goede's research could be important for research into children with language disorders and patients with aphasia, people who have problems with language as a consequence of brain damage. These groups often encounter more problems with verbs than nouns.

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