Narrative mode affects perspective adoption in sentence comprehension

Manami Sato\textsuperscript{1}, Jennifer Wu\textsuperscript{2}, Hiromu Sakai\textsuperscript{1}, and Benjamin K. Bergen\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}Hiroshima University, \textsuperscript{2}University of California, San Diego

contact: msato@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

During sentence processing, comprehenders generate mental representations of described scenes from particular perspectives ([1],[2]). The perspective a comprehender adopts can be modulated by person. For example, comprehenders tend to adopt an internal perspective (i.e., they take the protagonist's viewpoint) when the subject is 1\textsuperscript{st} or 2\textsuperscript{nd} person (e.g., \textit{I} or \textit{You}), but an external perspective (i.e., an outside observer’s viewpoint) when it is 3\textsuperscript{rd} person (e.g., \textit{He}) ([3]). However, within sentences using a given grammatical person, there can be variability in perspective, depending on context. This has been shown for first person language; when the discourse context provides rich information about an actor’s identity prior to a critical sentence, comprehenders are more likely to adopt an external perspective ([3]). However, it isn’t known whether comprehenders ever adopt internal representations in response to third person language. When does a reader project him/herself into the mind and body of a third person protagonist—\textit{him} or \textit{her}?

When third person language is used in actual narratives, it displays one of several narrative modes, differing in whether they describe the mental states or just the external appearances of a protagonist. The \textbf{third person subjective} describes information that is only accessible by the character, such as internal thoughts or unexpressed feelings (e.g., \textit{She could feel her blood boiling as she looked at the perfume bottle—not her perfume bottle—that she had found in her boyfriend’s bathroom}). In contrast, the \textbf{third person objective} only describes observable information about that character (e.g., \textit{She remained still, but occasionally glanced at the perfume bottle}).

\textbf{(a) Third-person subjective context}

(1) She was very uncomfortable because her hands felt sticky and there was still clay under her nails from her ceramics class.
(2) She desperately wanted to wash her hands, but could not see a sink anywhere.
(3) She could feel the clay drying even more and eyed the small towel on the table.
(4) \textit{She picked up the hand towel}.

\textbf{(b) Third-person objective context}

(1) She appeared out of breath when she rushed into the room.
(2) She looked down at the table, where there was a hand towel.
(3) Her hands were covered with clay, and she glanced back and forth between her clay-covered hands and the towel.
(4) \textit{She picked up the hand towel}. 
In principle, this distinction in narrative mode could affect the perspective that comprehenders adopt; they might be more likely to adopt an internal perspective for the subjective but an external perspective for the objective mode.

We investigated whether these different narrative modes affect what perspective readers adopt during sentence processing. We had 44 native English speakers read four-sentence, third-person stories in one of the two modes. Following [3], they then decided if a pictured event was part of the story. The picture depicted the event from either (a) an internal or (b) external perspective.

(a) Internal perspective  (b) External perspective

Twenty-four critical sentences and corresponding pairs of internal and external perspective pictures were created and fully crossed to produce matching and mismatching pictures for each item. If third-person subjective narratives lead participants to access an internal perspective, participants should respond faster to internal perspective pictures than to external ones. Conversely, third-person objective narratives should facilitate responses to external perspective pictures. As expected, responses to external pictures were significantly faster after objective narratives than after subjective narratives, and vice versa for subjective narratives (significant interaction effects of Context and Perspective: $F_1(1,51)=6.6, p=0.01$; $F_2(1,22)=5.5, p=0.03$).

These results suggest that narrative mode affects the perspective comprehenders adopt; objective mode makes people more likely to adopt an external viewpoint in which they see the protagonist as an observer would, while subjective mode makes comprehenders more likely to adopt an internal viewpoint in which they projecting themselves inside the protagonist.

References: