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“Perspective in Language Comprehension”

When we observe or participate in events, the roles we play determine our perceptual, motor, and affective experiences. A swimmer, for instance, experiences her race differently from her fans. But what about events that we don't experience directly--ones that we come to know about through language? Do we adopt a particular perspective when mentally representing described events? And if so, what factors affect the perspective we adopt? A series of experiments shows that comprehenders quickly and automatically construct mental representations of described events that adopt a particular perspective. Further work shows that grammatical details can affect the perspective that comprehenders adopt, and languages differ in how they deploy grammatical resources to indicate perspective (we look at English, Japanese, and Spanish). But differences in individuals' experiences with the described event also affect perspective adoption.

This work speaks to core questions about how we're able to understand language about events displaced from the present time and place, and how grammar and individual experience affect our understandings.