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Accessibility in language production

The notion of accessibility has played a prominent role in two areas of language production - the choice of referential expressions and the choice of a referent to start a sentence with. While several factors are known to affect accessibility in both areas (e.g., discourse status, animacy), it is an open question whether a unified notion of accessibility suffices to explain choices in both areas (see Vogels, Krahmer & Maes, 2019, for critical discussion). We present results from an ongoing series of picture-description experiments. Pictures showed transitive events with an animate agent acting on an animate or inanimate patient. Participants read a short context and then described the picture. The contexts varied, among others, whether the agent or the patient of the following picture was the discourse topic. The results show strong effects of animacy and topichood on referential choice (e.g., whether pronouns or definite NPs are produced) but less so on word order and voice. Implications for the notion of accessibility are discussed.