

Title: Does language put simulation in the driver's seat?

Abstract: How do we understand language? A leading idea, pursued over the past decade in a number of labs, including my own, is that people access meaning by constructing mental simulations corresponding to the content of the language they read or hear. These hypothesized mental simulations may have perceptual, motor, or affective content, and are thought to capture how meaning is processed in the mind of a language user. For instance, upon reading "Tim Tebow threw a 29-yard touchdown pass", a comprehender who knows something about football might conjure up a visual representation of what the touchdown-throwing might look like, or perhaps a motor representation of what it would feel like to act as the quarterback or the receiver, or both.

In this talk, I will review some of the evidence from our research on mental simulation in language understanding. We've found that language about percepts does indeed lead comprehenders to perform perceptual simulations, just as language about actions leads them to perform motor simulations. Moreover, these mental simulations interact with language users' ability to actually act and perceive in the world, as shown by simulated driving research. However, our results also show that mental simulation is not a silver bullet for the issue of meaning. I'll review evidence from several studies showing that certain grammatical features serve to effectively turn aspects of mental simulation on or off. To the extent that mental simulation can be turned off, it doesn't seem to be sufficient for people's mental representations of described events.