



## Original Articles

# Long live the King! Beginnings loom larger than endings of past and recurrent events



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 11 September 2016

Revised 15 February 2017

Accepted 25 February 2017

Available online 6 March 2017

## Keywords:

Event cognition

Beginnings

History

Framing

Seasons

## ABSTRACT

Events are temporal “figures”, which can be defined as identifiable segments in time, bounded by beginnings and endings. But the functions and importance of these two boundaries differ. We argue that beginnings loom larger than endings by attracting more attention, being judged as more important and interesting, warranting more explanation, and having more causal power. This difference follows from a lay notion that additions (the introduction of something new) imply more change and demand more effort than do subtractions (returning to a previous state of affairs). This “beginning advantage” is demonstrated in eight studies of people’s representations of epochs and events on a historical timeline as well as in cyclical change in the annual seasons. People think it is more important to know when wars and reigns started than when they ended, and are more interested in reading about beginnings than endings of historical movements. Transitional events (such as elections and passages from one season to the next) claim more interest and grow in importance when framed as beginnings of what follows than as conclusions of what came before. As beginnings are often identified in retrospect, the beginning advantage may distort and exaggerate their actual historical importance.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The segmentation of time

Time, in the eyes of a human perceiver, is not continuous and seamless. Prehistoric time is divided into geological periods, historical time into ages, eras, or dynasties, calendars chop it up in months, weeks, and days, and tragedies unfold on the stage in acts and scenes. Most people, looking back upon their pasts, find it natural to describe their life stories as a sequence of distinct lifetime periods (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), or chapters (Thomsen, Pillemer, & Ivcevic, 2011). Within each chapter, they remember distinguishable episodes, often referred to as events. The changes between lifetime periods can themselves be described as transi-

tional events (Brown, 2016). Recently, Rubin and Umanath (2015) have suggested a theory of event memory as an alternative to episodic memory for the recall of mentally constructed single scenes. In cognitive psychology, a field of event perception has emerged, particularly concerned with segmentation and identification of action episodes of relatively brief durations (from seconds to minutes) that are perceived or witnessed directly rather than being read or talked about (see Radvansky & Zacks, 2014, for an overview).

In the present article, we use *events* more broadly as a general label for all identifiable segments of time, from historical epochs to more specific happenings nested within the larger ones. Some of these segments are, or appear to be, objectively defined, like a journey that starts when the travelers leave home, and ends when they arrive at their point of destination. Others are more clearly the result of human observers’ attempts to make sense and impose a structure upon a temporal sequence, as for instance with historical categories such as the *Age of enlightenment* (Withers, 2007) and the *Cognitive revolution* (Baars, 1986; Leahey, 2001), whose nature,

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boundaries, and even claims to existence strongly depend on the perspective of the narrator.

In contrast to studies of event perception, we are in this research primarily concerned with people's representations of temporally extended events that have taken place in the past rather than being observed in the present. Such events play an important role in structuring not only our personal histories but also the landscape of our collective history that is continually updated, changed, or reinforced by public narratives (Zerubavel, 2003).

Philosophers have suggested that events serve a similar function in the temporal domain as objects do in the spatial domain, namely as units with their own identity and their own boundaries, by which they can be distinguished from the surrounding field (Vendler, 1967). Objects in space have physical boundaries that separate them from their surroundings. Tables have sides, pictures have frames, and figures have contours that seem to "belong" to the figure, rather than to the ground (Rubin, 1915). Similarly, the prototypical historical event can be viewed as a figure, standing out against the general backdrop of a "normal", less remarkable state of affairs (Bruckmüller et al., in press). While ordinary physical objects are supposed to have relatively crisp spatial boundaries and vague temporal boundaries, events, by contrast, are supposed to have relatively vague spatial boundaries and crisp temporal boundaries (Casati & Varzi, 2015).

Following this analysis, events may be regarded as figures in time that can be separated from what came before and what happened later. Indeed, Zacks and Tversky (2001) suggest that otherwise divergent philosophical and psychological analyses of an event converge on one basic idea, namely that all events have a beginning and an end, and that anything that has a beginning and an end in time can be regarded as an event. By this definition, we can describe a party as an event starting with the arrival of the guests and ending when they leave, or a war as an event starting with an assault or a declaration of war and ending with a victory or a proclamation of peace. Even more arbitrary partitions of time, such as the successive seasons of a year, can be described by cues marking their emergence and their disappearance. In short, these happenings would not be described as event entities unless they came into being at a specific point in time and were concluded at another, later, occasion.

Events have parts that in themselves can be described as subordinate or micro-events, and are included in more comprehensive macro-events extended over larger time spans, forming hierarchically structured "partonomies" (Hard, Tversky, & Lang, 2006). Thus, a war can be described as a fairly comprehensive event including part events like troop movements, individual battles, and peace negotiations, each with a structure of its own.<sup>1</sup> Beginnings and endings belong to the structure of any event, but may in turn be viewed as subordinate events in their own right, which implies, in Churchill's (1943) words, that we can have "a beginning of the end" as well as "an end of the beginning". In the present studies, we do not set upper or lower limits to the scope and extension of an event, but use this term to encompass all temporally defined happenings, from episodes of short duration, like the shots in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, to long term epochs like wars and monarchs' reigns spanning several years. Similarly, we regard the four seasons of the year as annual macro-events, which encompass more circumscribed, culturally or climatically defined events such as summer vacation, harvest,

and school start. With adjacent events, such as successive reigns or the passage from one season to another, the transition itself is sometimes conceived as an event, or alternatively framed as the end of one epoch or the beginning of a new one, as expressed by the epigrammatic announcement: *The king is dead. Long live the king!* This traditional proclamation, used in several countries to mark the end of one (male) monarch's reign and the beginning of a new reign, suggests that these two phases nevertheless belong together in one single constitutional act.

For a graphical illustration of events as separated or adjacent "figures", see Fig. 1. The events might in both cases be historical or natural, and their "contours" (the beginnings and endings) can be well defined or more poorly defined, naturally given or arbitrarily imposed.

## 1.2. A beginning advantage

The temporal boundaries of events differ from the spatial contours of objects in that they appear in a fixed sequential order. Specifically, both boundaries of an event describe transitions, or changes. The beginning marks a transition from absence to presence of the target event, as in the announcement of the new king (who is elevated to monarch from his passive status as heir to the throne), whereas endings tell us that something has passed out of existence (literally, in the case of the deceased king). Even if both transitions may be of comparable scope and magnitude, we claim that beginnings suggest more of a contrast with the default state of affairs, than endings do, which sometimes simply imply a return "back to normal". In other words, the "step up" from non-existence to existence implied by a beginning of an event may loom larger than the "step down" for something that simply has ceased to exist. Analogous asymmetries have been observed in other areas, as with the action/inaction asymmetry (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) and the omission bias in decision making (Baron & Ritov, 2004), which both assume that people are more affected by what they do than by what they abstain from doing. Rozin, Fischler, and Shields-Argelès (2009) showed that *additions* change the nature of a product more than *subtractions*, suggesting a principle of "additivity dominance". In analogy, journal editors seem to think that adding a study to a submitted manuscript would constitute a *major* revision, whereas removing one would only be a *minor* revision.

From the principles of contrast and additivity dominance, several predictions can be derived:

Beginnings will attract more *attention*, and often be regarded as more *important* than endings. Within history, we predict that beginnings of wars will focus attention more than their terminations, and that the introduction of a new cultural product (a style of dress, a school of art) will appear as more striking than the same product going out of fashion. As a result, beginnings will be given more coverage in historical accounts. Similarly, we suggest that the same event, framed as a beginning, will capture the reader's attention more than the same event, framed as an ending (e.g., a new law introduced vs. an old law repealed).

Beginnings will also be considered more *interesting* than endings. This follows from theories of curiosity (Berlyne, 1960; Silvia, 2008), which see interest as related to novelty and amount of surprise. Levels of surprise are associated with the extent to which an event contrasts with the default, expected alternative (Teigen & Keren, 2003). Unexpectedness, novelty, and importance can make beginnings more vivid and memorable, and also make them *beg for explanations* more than endings do (Bruckmüller et al., in press). Endings may be perceived as flowing more naturally from the event itself, whereas beginnings appear to spring from causes situated outside of the events they begin.

<sup>1</sup> Such events can also be described at different levels of abstraction, forming hierarchical "taxonomies", as when we say that physical battles and political debates are both expressions of conflicts, or that a business trip and a polar expedition can both be defined as journeys. Partonomies and taxonomies should not be confused. Journeys and wars are not *parts* of the event concept but more concrete instantiations of the event concept, or in other words, *kinds* of events.

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