The grammar of parsing:

Preference for events over entities in complement of perceptual verbs

Relative Clauses (RC) in the complement position of perceptual verbs in French (among other languages), but not in English (2a), are ambiguous between a RC reading (1a), in which the CP modifies an individual, and the so-called Pseudo Relative (PR) reading (1b), which denotes an event and roughly corresponds to an eventive Small Clause in English (Moulton & Grillo 2015, Grillo and Moulton 2016a,b).

2. (2) a. I’ve seen the man that ran]] b. I’ve seen the man running]

Grillo (2012) and Grillo & Costa (2014) showed that this distinction is relevant for explaining apparent cross-linguistic asymmetries in the resolution of RC-attachment ambiguities (Cuetos & Mitchell 1988 among many others) and proposed that PRs are favored by the parser because they are structurally and interpretively simpler than RCs: PRs have impoverished structures (Cinque 1992), they introduce information relevant to the main assertion of the sentence (Frazier 1990) and are supported by simpler contextual representations than those required by RCs (Crain & Steedman 1985; Altman & Steedman 1988).

In this talk, I present experimental results in support of this hypothesis. Results from different techniques (offline questionnaires, self-paced reading, eye-tracking and planned production) and languages (Italian, English, French, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish) will be discussed. Results consistently show a parsing preference for events over entities in the environment of perceptual verbs, which observed not just with PRs but also with cognate structures in languages that do not allow PRs, e.g. eventive Small Clauses in English and Prepositional Infinitives in Portuguese.