

The influence of prosodic, syntactic and lexical aspects on naturalness evaluation in German

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As part of my Forschungsprojekt, I studied the effect of implicit causality on the prosody of givenness in German. The prosody of givenness is a well-researched area which not only includes the levels of given and new information but also a third intermediate level of accessibility (Chafe 1994). In German, given information is marked by deaccentuation, new information is marked by L+H* and accessible information is marked by H+L* (Baumann & Grice 2006; Röhr & Baumann 2010). Implicit causality (IC) is a lexical-semantic property of transitive verbs which trigger explanations focusing systematically on one of its binding arguments (Bott & Solstad 2014). The proportion to which an explanation is attributed to either the first argument (NP1) or the second argument (NP2) is called IC bias. Different classes of verbs show different IC bias patterns. While the class of stimulus-experiencer (SE) verbs show preferences for NP1, the class of experiencer-stimulus (ES) verbs show preferences for NP2 (Brown & Fish 1983).

The effect of implicit causality on the different levels of givenness was tested with an acceptability judgement task. Fifteen untrained listeners of German were asked to evaluate the naturalness of utterance sequences which contained prosodic, syntactic and lexico-semantic congruencies or incongruencies, respectively. The utterance sequences consisted of two utterances, the first of which introduced a scenario (Sanford & Garrod 1981). The second utterance contained either an SE or ES verb binding a new referent in subject position (NP1) and an accessible referent in object position (NP2). The prosodic realisations of the second utterance varied in that NP2 was either deaccented or realised with H+L* or L+H*. Acceptability ratings were low ranging from 48% to 56% for all utterance sequences. Furthermore, neither prosodically congruent (H+L*) nor incongruent utterance sequences (deaccentuation and L+H*) were rated to be highly acceptable. These results could be explained in two ways: (1) Overall low ratings could be due to the preference of IC verbs not to leave missing causal content underspecified (Bott & Solstad 2014). (2) The realisation of accessible information might not be limited to only one accent type. Rather, the relation between givenness and prosody could be probabilistic in nature allowing different accent types to be realised with accessible information (Baumann & Riester 2013).

References

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