Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

Seminar für Sprachwissenschaft

**Acceptability Judgements About  
Contrastive Dialogues Involving Ellipsis:  
A Pilot Study**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

This research co

# 1. Introduction

The pronunciation of a sentence holds significance, encompassing not only the stressed word but also the elements emphasized in the conversation, impacting the naturalness perceived by native speakers. This becomes particularly intriguing in dialogues that involve contrastive focus, as illustrated in the following example (1).

1. A: *Peter hat seinem BRUDER ein Buch geschenkt*.

‘Peter gave a book to his BROTHER.’

B: *Nein, seinem VATER*.

‘No, his FATHER’

1. A:  *Peter hat AB 18 Uhr im Kino gearbeitet*.

‘Peter worked at the cinema FROM 6pm.’

B: *Nein, BIS 18 Uhr*.

‘No, UNTIL 6pm.’

1. A: *Peter hat ab 18 Uhr im KINO gearbeitet*.

‘Peter worked at the CINEMA from 6pm.’

B: *Nein, BIS 18 Uhr*.

‘No, UNTIL 6pm.’

On one hand, it is evident that speaker B is correcting a specific part of speaker B's utterance, as *Bruder* ‘brother’ and *Vater* ‘father’ as well as *ab* and *bis* contrast. However, on the other hand, speaker B’s response is not a complete sentence. Therefore, the reader, first, has to determine what the word *Vater* contrasts with and then what speaker B’s response is intended to convey. Comprehending speaker B’s responses might be even more difficult, if the respective words are not orthographically marked in written stimuli or if another word is emphasized instead in auditory stimuli, as can be seen in (3).

The present paper aims to determine the best medium for reliably obtaining judgments about such dialogues. That is, we tested whether dialogues such as (1) are rated more naturally if the contrasting words are orthographically marked and comparing the results to the verbal equivalents of (1), in which the respective words, i.e., *Bruder* and *Vater* are prosodically stressed. We hypothesize that stimuli with emphasis on the contrasting words, i.e., orthographic marking or pitch accent, respectively, are deemed more natural by native speakers. Moreover, we hypothesize that auditory stimuli are more likely to be accepted by native speaker than written stimuli. Regarding the contrasting words, we hypothesize that stimuli with lexical words in contrastive focus, i.e., *Bruder* and *Vater*, receive higher acceptability rating than stimuli with functional words in contrastive focus, i.e., *ab* ‘from’and *bis* ‘until’.

The present paper is divided as follows. This theoretical background on fragments, focus, and ellipsis comprehension, as well as our hypotheses in more depths.

Motivation of paper: acceptability judgements have barely been used so far, first study to test the best medium for acceptability judgements about fragments

# 2. Literary review

Consider (4).

1. Abby and Ben are at a party. Abby asks Ben about who their mutual friend Beth is bringing as a date by uttering: “Who is Beth bringing?” Ben answers:

“Alex.”

(Merchant 2004, p. 661)

Ben’s answer only consists of one word and yet, it can easily be derived that it is intended to convey that Beth is bringing Alex. Linguistic expressions such as Ben’s answer are called fragments (cf. Merchant 2004). According to the sententialist approach as proposed by Merchant (2001), fragments are the only pronounced item in a full-fledged yet unpronounced clause. That is, while clausal ellipsis suppresses the phonological realization of most parts of the sentence, one or more subconstituents of the clause survive ellipsis. These remnants of ellipsis are called fragments.

One specific type of fragments are contrastive fragments. These fragments include focus. According to Krifka (2008), focus can be defined as follows.

1. A property F of an expression α is a Focus property iff F signals
2. That alternatives of (parts of) the expression α or
3. Alternatives of the denotation of (parts of) α are relevant for the interpretation of α.

(Krifka 2008, p. 248, emphasis removed)

While the first case (4a) is concerned with the expression itself, focus as in case (4b) is used to identify the specific part of the sentence that should be replaced by an alternative denotation. The second case will be called contrastive focus in the following.

1. A: Mary stole the cookie.

B: (No,) [PEter]F stole the cookie!

(Krifka 2008, p. 252, emphasis in original)

As can be seen in (5), the contrastive focus is used to correct the information provided by speaker A (cf. Krifka 2008). However, the alternative denotations must be of the same type and be mutually exclusive (cf. Wagner 2012, Krifka 2008).

* Background on sentence comprehension

# 3. Data and method

X

## 3.1 Study design

The experiment was conducted using a 2 (modality: written or auditory) x 2 (emphasis: with or without emphasis) x 2 (fragment-type: functional or lexical word) study design. After a welcoming page, participants were randomly assigned to either only written or auditory stimuli and then presented with four(?) conditions of each variable, i.e., with and without emphasis as well as functional and lexical fragments.

The questionnaire was an ordinal response task on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = fully acceptable, 7 = fully unacceptable). Participants were asked to rate speaker B’s response in the dialogue involving contrastive focus. Prior, acceptable and fully unacceptable, and neither acceptable nor unacceptable examples were given on the welcoming page to the study. To exclude the unwanted interpretation in which an elliptical remnant corresponds to an optional sprouted locative adjunct, all stimuli were preceded by a context-setting sentence in which the location of the referent under discussion was specified (see examples (27) to (30) for illustrations). The questionnaire used a Latin-square design and contained six sub-experiments, four of which are relevant for the current study (see the list of stimuli in the Appendix). Two sub-experiments were unrelated to the current study (they contained non-elliptical sentences in which a preposition is doubled, and ellipsis with prepositions as sole items). Our filler stimuli were elliptical sentences with a missing predicate after a finite, non-modal auxiliary verb. The experiment was run in Qualtrics. Each test stimulus was presented on a separate page, and the order of the target and filler items was randomized across all sub-experiments and participants. The questionnaire was completed by 91 native speakers, 9 of whom self-identified as bilingual (Dutch-Frisian/English/French/ Mandarin/Serbian). The informants did not receive any remuneration for filling in the questionnaire, nor was any personal data retained other than their status as monolingual or bilingual speakers. The results of the experiment were statistically analyzed in Excel (descriptive statistics) and via the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (the non-parametric equivalent of the dependent t test) in R.

## 3.2 Participants

Pilot study showed that sex and education play no significant role but age and geography must be controlled for (Quelle)

# 4. Findings

Using

# 5. Discussion

Since

# 6. Conclusions

This paper gives an overview of the

# 7. References

# 8. Appendix

## 8.1 Abbreviations, symbols and other notational conventions

? questionable/marginal acceptability

# infelicitous

\* ungrammatical

1 … *t*1 syntactic movement

XPi … YPi coreference

CAPITALSorthographical marking or pitch accent

[…]F focused position

A, B, … speaker

iff if and only if

## 8.2 List of stimuli

*Insert stimuli here*

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby confirm that this paper and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others this is always clearly stated. All statements taken literally from other writings or referred to by analogy are marked and the source is always given. This paper has not yet been submitted to another examination office, either in the same or similar form.

Tübingen, September 30th, 2023



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