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 words but also the contents emphasized in the conversation. However, it is reasonable to assume that the perception of naturalness by native speakers may not solely depend on the stressed word but also on its associated meaning. This becomes particularly intriguing in dialogues that involve contrastive focus, as illustrated in the following example (1).

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.’

(own example)

Although speaker B’s response in (1) is not a complete sentence, it conveys a sentential meaning. However, the reader, first, must determine what the word *bis* ‘until’ contrasts with and then what speaker B’s response is intended to convey.

While speaker B's response in (1) lacks a complete sentence structure, it does convey a meaning that corresponds to a sentence: *Peter worked at the cinema until 6pm*. However, for the reader to grasp its intended message, they need to first identify the word *bis* ‘until’ as contrasting with something else and then discern the intended meaning behind speaker B's response. If the reader is not primed for the contrast, understanding speaker B's response could become even more challenging. This becomes particularly evident when speaker A emphasizes a word other than *bis*, as demonstrated in example (2).

The present paper aims to determine the most effective medium for reliably obtaining judgments about such dialogues. Specifically, it investigates whether dialogues that incorporate orthographically marked contrasting words, as in (2), are perceived as more natural compared to dialogues without orthographic marking as in (1). It is hypothesized that stimuli emphasizing the contrasting words are regarded as more natural by native speakers. Furthermore, a comparison is made between (1) and (2) and sentences without any orthographic marking, as well as their verbal counterparts where the respective words are prosodically marked. A second hypothesis posits that, generally, auditory stimuli are more likely to be accepted by native speaker than written stimuli. Lastly, it is hypothesized that stimuli with lexical words in contrastive focus such as *Bruder* ‘brother’ and *Vater* ‘father’ receive higher acceptability ratings than stimuli with functional words in contrastive focus such as *ab* and *bis.*

Surprisingly, acceptability judgments have been underutilized in previous studies, particularly when it comes to assessing the acceptability of fragments. While previous research has shed light on the comprehension of fragments and the role of focus and ellipsis, the specific focus on acceptability judgments has remained largely unexplored. Therefore, this study will be the first of its kind to systematically examine and compare different media for collecting acceptability judgments about fragments. By determining the best medium for reliably obtaining these judgments, our research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature of fragments and provide valuable insights for future studies in linguistics and psycholinguistics.

The present paper is subdivided as follows. Chapter 2 delves into the theoretical background of fragments, focus, and ellipsis comprehension, providing a more detailed explanation of our hypotheses. Chapter 3 centers on the study design and participant information. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, while chapter 5 explores and addresses any confounding factors related to the findings. Lastly, chapter 6 concludes with a summary of the study and offers insights into potential avenues for future research.

# 2. Literary review

Consider (3).

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. The constituent *Mary* in the antecedent sentence that is replaced by speaker B’s answer is called correlate.

1. A: Mary stole the cookie.

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

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

B’: (No,) [PEter]F!

(own example)

As can be seen in (5B), the contrastive focus placed on *Peter* serves to emphasize ⟦Peter⟧as an “alternative answer to an explicit or implicit statement provided by the previous discourse/situation” (Wagner 1999, p. 1529). The answers (14B) and (14B’) have the same meaning, despite of the fact that (14B’) only consists of one word, i.e., a fragment. In the given example, the context preposition of the utterances by speaker A and B differ, leading to speaker B correcting 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 ellipsis comprehension

The processor, i.e., hearer or reader of the dialogue, must finish the following three basic tasks in order to process the ellipsis.

1. Basic tasks of the processor in ellipsis processing:
2. Parse the remnant by constructing the appropriate phrase structure for the remnant given the input.
3. Locate the correlate, if any, from the antecedent clause.
4. Construct the elided phrase by regenerating or copying a structure at Logical Form

(Harris & Carlson 2018, p. 485)

In the example (5B’), that means that first, *Peter* is identified as remnant. Next, *Mary* is retrieved as correlate to *Peter*, as it appears to be a suitable contrasting denotation. Lastly, the elided phrase is contrasted, i.e., *Peter*1 *stole the cookie* t1(cf. Harris & Carlson 2018).

* Background on auditory and written stimuli and how prosody impacts language processing, especially for fragments?

Recent studies have investigated to what extent prosody impacts language processing. This is especially intriguing for the processing of ellipsis sentences and sentences involving contrastive focus. In the following, ToBI labelling (cf. Beckman & Ayers 1997) will be used for to refer to intonation patterns.

Contrastive focus has been characterized phonologically with a L+H\* pitch for English and German (cf. Wagner 1999). This leads to the hypothesis that prosodically marking contrasting words may allow the hearer to access the words quicker and more easily, leading to an easier understanding of the contrast. Carlson et al. (2009) investigated whether pitch accent affects how ambiguous replacive sentences such as (7) are interpreted.

1. a. ROGER insisted that Alice was reliable // not ANDREW[.]

b. Roger insisted that ALICE was reliable // not ANDREW[.]

c. ROGER insisted that ALICE was reliable // not ANDREW.

(Carlson et al. 2009, p. 1077)

Indeed, they found that pitch accent significantly influenced participants’ choice of the correlate of the replacive, i.e., whether the expression *Andrew* is used to replace *Roger* or *Alice*. There are two main differences between the sentences used in the study by Carlson et al. (2009) and the sentences used in the present study. First, the former uses replacive sentences, while the latter uses fragment answers. Since both are forms of ellipsis, it is still reasonable to compare the results. Second, the former uses ambiguous sentences, while the latter uses sentences disambiguated using case marking. Although the prosodic marking is not used to choose the current correlate, it allows the hypothesis that contrasting words with emphasis are easier to understand(?) and therefore, the first hypothesis holds that stimuli with emphasis on contrasting words are rated more natural than stimuli without any orthographic marking or with prosodic marking on a word other than the contrasting word. Additionally, the same should hold for words with orthographic markings since they are also emphasized and therefore more easily accessible in the discourse representation.

See more papers on sentence comprehension

* Theory and hypotheses

# 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.

Stimuli

* Contrastive focus never in sentence final position because that is the default focus position (Harris & Carlson 2018)
* Therefore, all stimuli are in past tense, ensuring that the verb is in final position
* …
* Explain the F0s and pitch accents in stimuli (see Carlson et al. 2009, p. 1077 as example)

## 3.2 Participants

Pilot study showed that sex and education play no significant role but age and geography must be controlled for (in CLEFS project summary gelesen, Quelle heraussuchen)

# 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

// intonational phrase boundary

CAPITALSorthographical marking or pitch accent

[…]F focused position

⟦…⟧ denotation/semantic representation

L+H\* pitch accent

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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