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: Where is John travelling from?

B: John is travelling with Mary from Africa.

C: No, Asia.

C’: No, to.

C’’: No, Susan.

C’’’: No, without.

From an intuitive standpoint, it seems that one would encounter any of speaker C’s responses unexpectedly. On one hand, it is evident that speaker C is correcting a specific part of speaker B's utterance, as *Africa* and *Asia* and *from* and *to*, etc. contrast. However, on the other hand, speaker C’s responses seem odd, as the reader, first, has to determine what the word contrasts with. This might be because the reader is not primed for the contrast. Instead, in dialogues, in which the contrasting words are orthographically marked (e. g. *africa* and *asia*), may be perceived more naturally by native speakers.

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 marked and comparing the results to the verbal equivalents of (1), including stimuli with and without pitch accent on the contrasting words. We hypothesize that stimuli with orthographic marking or pitch accent, respectively, on the contrasting words 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 content words in contrastive focus received higher acceptability rating than stimuli with functional words in contrastive focus and that stimuli with at-issue content in contrastive focus are rated more natural than stimuli with not-at-issue content in contrastive focus.

# 2. Literary review

According to Krifka (2008), “[f]ocus indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of linguistic expression” (p. 247).

Difference between Ellipsis and fragments?

Fragments are “seemingly nonsentential utterances that nevertheless convey full-fledged sentential meaning and the only pronounced item in a full-fledged yet unpronounced clause” (see paper by James for reference) Quelle 3, 4 5

One type of fragments, i.e., reprise fragments, are seemingly nonsentential questions that involve the repetition of a morpheme, word, or syntactic phrase from the most recent utterance in a discourse (Quelle 6)

Literature on German language

wh-movement language, see references 31, 50, 52, does not permit preposition-stranding movement, does not ordinarily tolerate bare nominal fragments

# 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

capitalspitch accent

FocP focused position

## 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



Miriam Schiele