Factors influencing the acceptability of left- peripheral movement in German
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Introduction

In German, objects can be optionally fronted to the prefield. In a series of acceptability rating studies, we examined two kinds of factors that have been proposed to influence the acceptability of OVS sentences: (i) properties of the subject that is crossed by the object’s movement (Frey 2004, 2010; Fanselow & Lenertová 2011), (ii) expressiveness associated with the utterance (Frey 2010).

Formal properties of crossed elements

Question: Which properties of crossed elements are relevant for the acceptability of object fronting?

Hypotheses:

- **Clitic-hood** of crossed elements is a crucial factor (Frey 2004, 2010): clitic-like definite pronoun subjects should show the smallest SVO-OVS difference.
- **Accentuation** of crossed elements is a crucial factor (Fanselow & Lenertová 2011): new, non-pronominal subject DPs should show the largest SVO-OVS difference.

Example:

Q: ‘What’s that smell? (What did the neighbor do?)’
A: ‘Wurstchen hat [er | der Mann | der Nachbar | ein Mann | jemand] gegrillt. Sausages, {he | the man | the neighbor | a man | somebody} has grilled.’

Method: 40 subjects, 24/16 items (def./ indef.); acceptability ratings on 7-point scale, transformed to z-scores for analysis; offline questionnaire.

Results: According to a linear mixed model with effect coding, the SVO-OVS difference in comparison to the mean across all conditions is... (reported values: t, p for interaction of the levels of subject type with word order; δ = SVO-OVS difference on the original 7-point scale)

- ...significantly smaller for clitical ‘definite pronoun’ (t = 3.85, p < 0.001; δ = 1.9) and for ‘coreferent DP’ (t = 3.07, p < 0.002; δ = 2.0).
- ...not significantly different for the ‘repeated DP’ (t = 0.79, p = 0.43; δ = 2.3).
- ...significantly larger for the accented ‘new DP’ (t = -3.11, p = 0.002; δ = 2.8) and for the indefinite pronoun (t = -4.60, p < 0.001; δ = 2.9).

Discussion:

- **Clitic-hood** captures the relatively small SVO-OVS difference in the definite pronoun condition; however, object fronting across a coreferent DP is similarly acceptable.
- **Accentuation** captures the over-average acceptability of crossing a def. pronoun and a coreferent DP, and the below-average acceptability of crossing a new DP; but the repeated DP and indefinite pronoun (both deaccentable, but not easily crossable) fall out of that pattern.

Expressiveness

Question: How do expressive particles and embedding influence the acceptability of object fronting?

Hypotheses:

- Object fronting is linked to **expressiveness** (cf. Frey 2010).
- Certain **particles** make an utterance expressive. They should thus reduce the SVO-OVS difference.
- When **reporting** somebody else’s utterance using an embedded sentence, the degree of expressiveness (linked to the speaker) is low. The SVO-OVS difference should thus be increased.

Example:

Q: ‘What did the student do?’
A: {⟨| Na | Denk bloß | Ich glaube | Peter sagt, | jemand} eine schwierige Gleichung hat die Frau gelöst. ⟨| Weil | Just imagine | I believe | Peter says,} a difficult equation, the woman solved.’

Method: 40 subjects, 40 items; acceptability ratings on 7-points scale, transformed to z-scores for analysis; offline questionnaire.

Results: According to a linear mixed model with treatment coding, the SVO-OVS difference in comparison to a neutral matrix clause (δ = 1.5) is... (t reported: t, p for interaction of the levels of subject type with word order; δ = SVO-OVS difference on the original 7-point scale)

- ...significantly smaller when an expressive element is present (*‘Na, ...’*: t = 4.65, p < 0.001; δ = 0.5; ‘Denk bloß, ...’: t = 3.43, p < 0.001; δ = 0.7).
- ...marginally larger when the clause is embedded under ‘Ich glaube, . . .’ (t = -1.76, p = 0.08; δ = 1.8).
- ...significantly larger when the clause is embedded under ‘X sagt, . . .’ (t = -2.80, p = 0.005; δ = 2.0).

Discussion:

- The results **support** the view that expressiveness facilitates object fronting.
- Open questions: (i) Does the expressiveness need to be associated specifically with the fronted object as assumed by Frey (2010), or is it a more general effect? (ii) Particles indicate an informal register, and OVS is more common in informal speech. Could the observed effect be reduced to that confounding factor? Both issues are currently investigated in follow-up studies.

References: