

The influence of visual salience on the exhaustivity of clefts and definite descriptions in German

In this talk, I will present experimental evidence of the effects of salience in terms of visual prominence on the interpretation of clefts sentences as more or less exhaustive. Experimental work I have done within the scope of my master thesis.

In the literature, there is a longstanding debate on the interpretation of cleft structures, (1), as (semantically) exhaustive (2) or not.

- (1) It is Peter who smokes a cigarette. (2) Nobody other than Peter smokes a cigarette.

It is normally taken for granted that one can infer (2) from (1) (see e.g. Büring & Križ 2012, Krifka 2007, Percus, 1997 among others), but it is unclear where this effect comes from. The question is whether the exhaustivity inference is a semantic or a pragmatic phenomenon. The conducted experiment provides evidence in favour of semantic analyses of it-cleft exhaustivity as being triggered by a covert definite determiner (cf. Percus 1997): same as strong definite descriptions (Schwarz 2009), it-clefts are interpreted as anaphorically related to a unique salient discourse referent in the context. If there is no salient referent, the cleft should be unacceptably. By contrast, if there is a salient referent with the background property, there is no need to consider other individuals in the discourse domain, and the cleft should be more acceptable. More generally, as most experimental work argues in favour of pragmatic analyses of cleft exhaustivity, the results provide new insights into the theoretical debate.

In a graded-judgment experiment, we compared German it-clefts, definite pseudoclefts and sentences containing basic definite descriptions (see (3), (4) and (5) for corresponding examples from the experiment.

- (3) Es ist Lars, der ein Buch liest.
‘It is Lars who reads a book.’
- (4) Derjenige, der einen ballon hat, ist Mark.
‘The one who has a baloon is Mark.’
- (5) Die Person, die einen Spazierstock hält, ist Tim.
‘The person who is carrying a cane is Tim.’

In addition, exclusive and plain subject focus sentences were added as control baselines (see (6) and (7)).

- (6) Nur Klaus trägt eine Brille. (7) Jan hat ein Fahrrad.
‘Jan has a bicycle.’ *‘Only Klaus wears glasses.’*

Sentences were judged by 60 native German speakers in a picture matching task. The visual contexts were manipulated with regard to [+/-] exhaustivity and [+/-] saliency of the (clefted) focus referent. The exhaustiveness inference was expected to be weakened in condition [-exh, +sal], i.e. when the focus referent (i.e. Peter) is visually more salient against other entities with the same background property (i.e. smoking a cigarette). This effect was observed for all three experimental sentence types: sentences were judged more acceptable in non-exhaustive contexts when the pivot was salient. Results reveal a statistically significant difference

between the conditions [+/-] salience when exhaustivity was violated. Importantly, it-clefts and their definite (pseudocleft) counterparts behaved on a par, suggesting a uniform source for the exhaustiveness inference: a maximality presupposition to be satisfied by some anaphorically accessible discourse antecedent.

In sum, the results suggest (i.) that violations of exhaustiveness with it-clefts can be alleviated by the context factor salience; and (ii.) that it-clefts behave on a par with definite (pseudocleft) descriptions. This provides experimental evidence for analyses of it-clefts as underlyingly definite.

References

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