Bare plurals, prosody and the interpretation of German relative clauses

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Background

Relative clauses (RCs) can be ambiguous between two kinds of interpretation, the restrictive relative clause (RRC) in (i), and the appositive relative clause (ARC) in (ii):

(i) Robbie adores the man who wrote 'Rob Roy'.

(ii) Robbie adores Scott, who wrote 'Rob Roy'.

In the RRC, the RC acts as a predicate (type <e,t>) restricting the denotation of the head noun via Predicate Modification (Heim & Kratzer, 1998). In the ARC reading, the RC is propositional (type f) and expresses an assertion about the referent of the head noun (Del Gobbo, 2007). In every-day contexts, lexical indicators (e.g., that -> restrictive; by the way -> appositive) and/or prosodic cues usually resolve this ambiguity (cf. Lehmann, 1994). Theoretical accounts claim that prosody determines the interpretation as RRC or ARC (Truckenbrodt, 2015). However, empirical evidence on the influence of prosody on the interpretation is mixed (cf. Birkner 2008, Schub et al. 2015, Trabandt 2016 for German). Therefore, the present study tests for RC interpretation preferences and the influence of prosody, using bare plurals as head nouns. It exploits the fact that RCs attached to bare plurals co-vary in their interpretation with the reading of the bare plural. The ARC interpretation corresponds to a kind-referential reading, and the RRC interpretation to a predicate reading (cf. Design). As the kind reading of bare plurals is the default (Chierchia, 1998), ARC interpretation should be preferred.

Research Questions

(Q1): How do adult speakers of German interpret ambiguous RCs?

(Q2): Does prosody influence the interpretation of ambiguous RCs?

Method:

• 12 ambiguous RC items as in (1), differing in prosodic realisation: 6x integrated + 6x non-integrated, divided in 2 blocks (balanced order)
• 12 ‘no’ and 12 ‘yes’ controls to ensure responses are based on linguistic form (2)+(3)

Participants:

24 adult monolingual native speakers of German (age 18-31; non-liguists)

Procedure:

After hearing a report on Robbie the robot’s visit to an alien planet with fictional animals, the participant is asked to confirm or reject a puppet’s interpretation of the stimuli wrt. whether all exemplars have a certain property.

Fig. 1b)

Prosodic realisation

Fig. 1a)

Fig. 2: Interpretation of ambiguous RCs + controls

Results

- Control conditions target-like, no “don’t know” responses
- (Q1): Across conditions, no significant preference for either type of interpretation in ambiguous RCs.
- (Q2): Prosody affects interpretation
  - Within the non-integrated prosody condition significantly more ARC than RRC interpretations (p=.003)
  - Significantly more ARC interpretations with non-integrated than with integrated prosody (p=.017)
  - No effect of order of prosody blocks

Conclusion

The setting of this experiment does not reveal an overall preference for either RRC or ARC interpretation of ambiguous German RCs (Q1). However, prosody plays a crucial role in determining the interpretation, such that non-integrated prosody increases the proportion of ARC interpretations significantly as compared to integrated prosody (Q2).

These results suggest that the type of head noun, the matrix predicate, as well as prosody influence RC interpretation in a complex interaction (see also Trabandt 2016).

In addition, the pragmatics of the task may have contributed to the ARC preference because new fictional species are introduced into the discourse. All these aspects should be considered in future RC research.

References:


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