German *es*-clefts raising prominence – An empirical study comparing written and spoken data

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Tönnis et al. (2016) observed that clefts are found less frequently in spoken than in written German. They propose that clefts are a device to mark prominence, in particular focus intonation, in written language but not in spoken language (see also DeVeaugh-Geiss et al. 2015). Spoken language usually marks focus with an A-accent in-situ (Bolinger 1958).

In written texts, the context of a sentence and world knowledge often suggest a certain element to be prominent by supporting a certain intonation more than any other. Furthermore, there is a default intonation for each sentence, determined by the prosodic restrictions of the particular language. I argue that a cleft in written German is used to mark unexpected prominence of the pivot constituent. This is necessary whenever there are neither enough cues in the context nor an acceptable word order that would shift prominence to the right constituent without clefting. The cleft keeps the reader from assuming a wrong intonation for the sentence, given the context. Hence, the cleft is a means for the writer of a text to reduce processing effort for the reader while figuring out the intended intonation. Since in spoken German prominence can be marked by prosodic means without much effort, the cleft is not required in spoken German.

The current study presents two experiments that compare a sample of clefts from the cleft corpus by Tönnis et al. to their optimal unclefted versions (henceforth OUVs) in spoken and written modality. The OUV of a cleft is the most natural ordering of the words from the original cleft sentence in the given context without clefting.

(1) *It was PETER who Mary visited.* CLEFT
(2) *Mary visited PETER.* OUV

The OUV of each cleft in the experiments is determined by four annotators (independently of each other). The following hypotheses will be tested:

H1. Depending on the cues for the intended intonation provided by the context and world knowledge, a naturally occurring cleft sentence in written German causes less processing effort for the reader than its OUV. The worse the cues are, the more the original cleft and its OUV differ with respect to processing effort.

H2. In spoken language, the OUVs with an A-accent on the former pivot (pivot intonation) tend to be easier to process than OUVs in written language. In spoken language, OUVs with default intonation are harder to process compared to pivot intonation, in case the two differ.

Experiment I is a reading study that will compare each original cleft to its OUV. The processing effort will be measured via the analysis of the participants' eye-movements during reading.

Experiment II will test H1 and H2 via an acceptability judgment task. It uses the same stimuli as Experiment I, presented both visually and auditorily to different participant groups. The auditory stimuli will occur with pivot intonation as well as default intonation. Depending on the context, pivot intonation in spoken language should improve the acceptability of the OUV compared to the OUV in written language. Whenever default and pivot intonation coincide, the OUV and the cleft should be judged similarly in written language.

References

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