

Online response to perspective-taking in narratives

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Prominence and Perspective

- Discourse referents that are more prominent with respect to their grammatical function, their thematic role or the type of expression they are referred to, are more likely to be perspectival centers than competing referents.
- The perspectival center of a sentence or stretch of discourse is the referent that can be regarded to be the thinker or speaker to whom utterances and attitudes can be ascribed.
- The correct interpretation of narration featuring phenomena such as free indirect discourse (FID) requires the reader to identify the perspectival center. (Hinterwimmer, 2017)

Free Indirect Discourse

- can be defined as “mode of narration where we can listen to a protagonist’s thought” (Eckardt, 2014)
- can only be processed correctly if the reader is able to take the protagonist’s perspective
- characteristics are, for example, interjections, judgmental statements, exclamations, discourse particles, rhetorical questions and a shift in deixis with respect to the discourse referent (Steube, 1985; Eckard, 2014 & Banfield, 1982)

(1) Last Friday John wanted to go to a concert. Right before he got to the concert hall he checked his pockets. *Oh no, had he really left the tickets at home? Now it was too late!*

Prior Experimental Approaches to Perspective-taking

Self Paced Reading

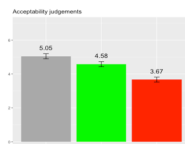
- ⊖ No significant results as violations are too subtle, despite promising stimuli and carefully designed experimental conditions
- ⊕ quick habituation to sloppy changes in perspective, possibly a style of narration

(2) When Maria left the pub a man stood right in her way.

- a) He smacked her in the face with an umbrella. Ouch, how that hurt!
- b) ?? She smacked him in the face with an umbrella. Ouch, how that hurt! What a day!

Acceptability rating (on a 7-point scale)

- ⊕ FID anchored to the more prominent referent was rated significantly higher (4.58) than FID anchored to the competing referent (3.67)
- ⊖ low acceptability of FID in short discourse



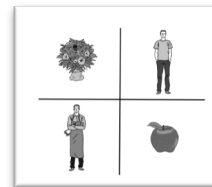
(3) When the wedding of Prince William and Kate was broadcast on TV, Robert could hardly wait for his own wedding. He, too, had proposed to his girlfriend.

- a) Soon he would walk down the aisle with his darling.
- b) ?? Soon she would walk down the aisle with her darling.
- c) She will walk down the aisle with him.

Experiment

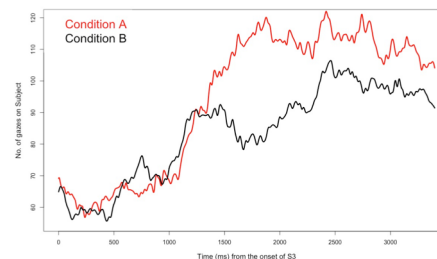
- **Eye-tracking in the visual world paradigm**
 - auditory presentation of short stories (see (4) below)
 - visual presentation of 4 related pictures (2 referents, 2 objects)
- **40 native speakers** of German
- **22 items** in 2 conditions (44 fillers and comprehension questions)
- **Test Items: (4)**
 - **4-sentence short stories**
 - S1: introducing one **highly prominent protagonist** with a **proper name in subject position**, a second **minimally prominent referent with an indefinite article in object position**
 - S2: introducing an object as a neutral starting point, prevent recency effects, no reference to the protagonists
 - S3 (condition a): an utterance in **FID** involving at least three characteristics of FID
 - S3 (condition b): a sentence of similar content in **narrative style**
 - S4: final sentence, spill-over, no reference to the protagonists

- (4)
- S1: Martin fragte einen Floristen an einem Stand nach einem Blumenstrauß für den Muttertag.
- S2: Der Geruch der Blumen lockte jedoch einige Wespen an.
- S3: a) Oh, jetzt bloß ruhig stehen bleiben, um die Mistviecher nicht zu reizen.
b) Um Wespen nicht zu reizen, sollte man ruhig stehen bleiben.
- S4: Doch bald darauf flogen sie schon wieder weg.



- S1: Martin asked a florist at a stall for a bouquet for mother's day.
- S2: The smell of the flowers attracted some wasps.
- S3: a) Oh, better stand still now, not to aggravate those beasts.
b) As not to aggravate wasps one better stand still.
- S4: Soon they flew away.

- **Results:**
Significantly higher number of gazes on the subject in condition a) compared to condition b) starting at approx. 1500 ms from the onset of S3



Conclusions

- Our findings suggest that more gazes on the most prominent referent in condition (a) are due to the ascription of authorship of the utterance/thought in FID.
- We regard these results as a proof of concept for further research employing the visual-world paradigm for investigating prominence status and perspective taking in language processing.

How to Proceed

Follow-up Experiments:

- Test only the FID condition and change S1 with respect to the prominence of the two referents
- Prominence-lending cues to investigate:
 - Grammatical function
 - word order
 - thematic role
 - type of referring expression
 - quantity vs. quality of reference
- Adjust stimuli with regard to (our) prior experiments (possibly comparable to Kaiser (2015) or Harris & Potts (2009))

Problems to solve:

- Uncertainty about processing of FID
- Inconsistent stimuli:
 - FID condition not comparable to narrative condition
 - FID hard to model to form comparable and natural sentences
 - As characteristics of FID vary in their position uncertainty about the onset of the effect

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