

Contrastive and non-contrastive Poset-licensing of German marked word order

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Word order is one of the best studied aspects of German syntax. There is abundant psycholinguistic evidence that, taken out of context, sentences with marked word order---i.e., sentences, where the order of subject and object is reversed---are judged as less acceptable and show an increase in processing difficulty in online experiments relative to their unmarked counterparts (s. Hemforth, 1993).

Many studies have tried to modulate that processing difference for marked word order by embedding sentences with marked word order into contexts inducing a specific information structure for the marked word order sentences. The reasoning behind is that, given the right kind of context, a sentence with marked word order should be just as easy to process as its unmarked counterpart (what we call *weak contextual licensing*), or even easier (*strong licensing*). The most important information structural factor being manipulated in these studies was the discourse status of the subject and the object in the target sentences (s. Bayer & Marslen-Wilson, 1992; Bader, 1999; Keller, 2000; Weskott, 2003; Bornkessel & Schlesewsky, 2006). Most studies tried to manipulate the information structure of target sentences by inducing some kind of contrast between the object referent and some referent in the context. However, these studies found no online evidence for strong licensing in these contrastive contexts.

In an acceptability and a self-paced reading study (wordwise non-cumulative moving window), we presented marked vs. unmarked word orders like the ones in (1) with and without the preceding context. In the conditions with context, a whole-part relation holds between the subject referent of the context sentence (the car) and the object referent of the target sentence (the rear-view mirror). In addition to the factor context (present vs. absent) and the WORD ORDER of the target sentence (SVO vs. OVS), we also manipulated whether the target sentence expressed a CONTRAST relation relative to the context, (cf. (1.b) vs. (1.c)).

We predicted that whole-part, being a paradigmatic case of a Poset relation (s. Prince, 1998), should yield a strong licensing effect. That is, OVS word orders should be less acceptable and harder to process than SVO in the null context, but the reverse should hold true in the whole-part context (interaction of CONTEXT and WORD ORDER). In addition, we were interested in the effect of the factor CONTRAST on the licensing effect.

Our results show the predicted interaction of WORD ORDER and CONTEXT. We interpret this as evidence that whole-part one type of Poset relation is indeed a strong licensor of marked word order.

In addition, and this is surprising given previous studies, we found no effect of the CONTRAST factor: the licensing effect was not affected by whether the target sentence expressed a contrast to the context (1.b), or rather some kind of a specification (1.c).

We conclude that marked word order in German is licensed in contexts which provide a Poset-related antecedent for the object referent, and that this holds true irrespective of the contrastivity of the contextual relation.

(1) .a [Context: Peter hat den Wagen gewaschen. (*Peter has washed the car.*)]

(1) .b Er hat den Außenspiegel ausgelassen./Den Außenspiegel hat er ausgelassen.

(*He_{nom} has the_{acc} rear view mirror omitted./The_{acc} rear view mirror has he_{nom} omitted.*)

(1) .c Er hat den Außenspiegel besonders gründlich gewienert./Den Außenspiegel hat er besonders gründlich gewienert.

(*He_{nom} has the_{acc} rear view mirror particularly diligently polished./The_{acc} rear view mirror has he_{nom} particularly diligently polished.*)