

Antecedent Preferences for Anaphoric Demonstratives in German

I present an investigation of the antecedent preferences of personal pronouns and anaphoric demonstratives in German, and discuss these preferences in terms of grammatical role, thematic role and topicality of the antecedent, and current theories of discourse processing.

In German, two pronominal systems are used for third person reference: the “er”, “sie”, “es” series, which I will here refer to as personal pronouns, and the “der”, “die”, “das” series, homophonous with the definite article system, which I will here term anaphoric demonstratives. Anaphoric demonstratives present an interesting case for theories of discourse, such as Almor’s (1999) Informational Load Hypothesis (ILH), which focus on the informativeness of anaphors as a predictor of the salience of the antecedent. Anaphoric demonstratives are equally informative as personal pronouns in German, both bearing number and gender information. If the informativeness of an antecedent is the main predictor of antecedent preference, one would expect that anaphoric demonstratives and personal pronouns have similar antecedent preferences.

Previous research on German (Bosch, Katz and Umbach, in press) has suggested that while there is a preference for personal pronouns to refer to the Subject of a preceding sentence, anaphoric demonstratives are more likely to refer to a Non-subject, regardless of whether the antecedent occurs pre-or post-verbally. However Bosch et al’s data refer primarily to production data; here I aim to extend their work in two ways: firstly, by examining comprehension, and by additionally examining thematic role as a possible constraint.

Data from three experiments is presented, a judgement task (Experiment 1) and a visual world experiment (Experiment 2) examining the importance of the grammatical role and topicality of potential antecedents, and a further visual world experiment (Experiment 3, currently in preparation), which looks at the grammatical role and thematic role of antecedents. Participants were presented with an antecedent sentence with either SVO or OVS word order, followed by a sentence starting with either a personal or demonstrative pronoun. The personal pronoun and anaphoric demonstrative matched both potential antecedents in number and gender. Participants were asked to make a coreference judgement in Experiment 1; in Experiment 2 eye-movements to the potential antecedents were analysed.

While the results from Experiment 1 suggested that anaphoric demonstratives prefer non-topic antecedents, and personal pronouns seem to be sensitive to both topicality and grammatical role, the visual world study was less conclusive, as differences between personal pronouns and demonstratives were found in the SVO conditions, but not the OVS conditions. However, in Experiments 1 and 2, thematic role coincided with grammatical role, leading to a possible confound. Furthermore, in Experiment 1, Subjects were more typical Agents than in Experiment 2, possibly leading to the differences in results. Experiment 3 aims to investigate this possibility, using active and passive sentences, so that the Subject has both an Agent or Patient role. Although the factors determining antecedent preferences for anaphoric demonstratives and personal pronouns not yet clear, this work has confirmed that their antecedent preferences do not match the predictions made by Almor’s (1999) ILH.