Contrastive focus constructions hurt memory for sentence processing

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Good–enough processing of focus constructions
- Competition between parses occurs for disfluencies and focus (Ferreira, 2003; Ferreira, Bailey, & Ferraro, 2002)
- On the other hand, focus highlights unusual or important information

Research question:
Does competition between parses hurt memory for sentences?
- Focus constructions may impair memory
  - Good–enough parses: Comprehension failures may lead to inaccurate memory
  - Episodic interference: X and Y are similar on many levels (syntax, semantics, form)
- Focus may support accurate memory
  - It–cleft constructions
  - Pitch accents (Fraundorf, Watson, & Benjamin, 2010)

Procedure

Study phase
- 90 participants
- 42 critical sentences (+ 42 filler) presented word–by–word

Critical sentence types:
1. Correct–is–First (FNP1)
   - Read: We spied a chair, not a ball...
   - Test: chair / ball
2. Correct–is–Second (FNP2)
   - Read: We spied not a ball but a chair...
   - Test: chair / ball
3. Single NP (NP1, NP2)
   - Read: We spied a chair...
   - Test: chair / ball

Test phase
- Two alternative forced–choice recognition task in response to questions
  - “What did we spy on the beach?”

Conclusion
- The negated content is an effective distractor for the correct answer in recognition
- No significant difference between memory in the different focus constructions
- Do memory failures arise at encoding or retrieval?

Future Directions
- “the X and then the Y” to test good–enough and episodic interference accounts
- Add supporting discourse context
- Disfluencies and spoken language processing
- Event related potentials

References