

Contrastive focus constructions hurt memory for sentence processing

Cassandra L. Jacobs^{1,2}, Fernanda Ferreira²

1: University of Toronto, 2: University of California, Davis

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

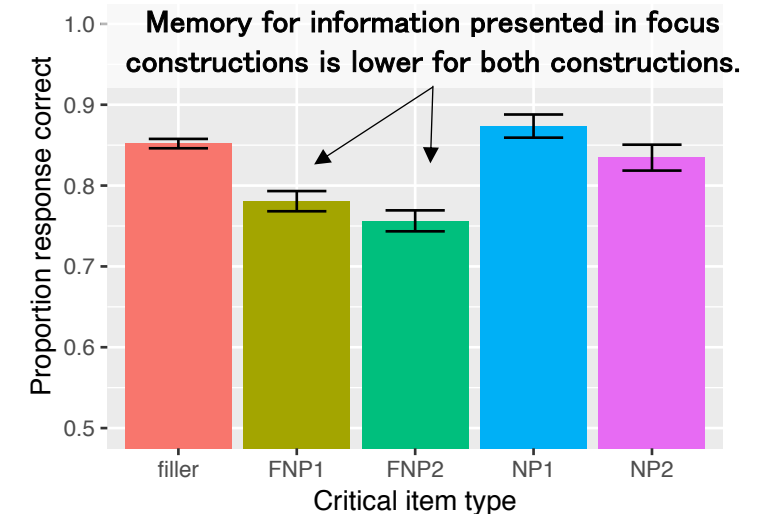
Study phase

- 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?”

References /// Ferreira, F., Bailey, K. G., & Ferraro, V. (2002). Good-enough representations in language comprehension. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11, 11–15. /// Ferreira, F. (2003). The misinterpretation of noncanonical sentences. *Cognitive Psychology*, 47, 164–203. /// Fraundorf, S. H., Watson, D. G., & Benjamin, A. S. (2010). Recognition memory reveals just how CONTRASTIVE contrastive accenting really is. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 63, 367–386.



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