

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Experimental evidence: Spalek et al. 2014

Radek Šimík



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

ALTERNATIVES ARE UNAVOIDABLE



Piper Kerr, a member of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition, plays the bagpipes for an indifferent penguin, March 1904


ALTERNATIVES ARE UNAVOIDABLE



Piper Kerr (right), a member of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition, plays the bagpipes for an indifferent penguin, March 1904

ALTERNATIVES ARE UNAVOIDABLE



Piper Kerr (right [\[citation needed\]](#)), a  member of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition, plays the bagpipes for an indifferent penguin, March 1904

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF PROSODIC FOCUS

Gernsbacher & Jescheniak (1995):

(1) a. [...] she just had to buy an ashtray [...]

NO PROSODIC EMPHASIS ON *ashtray*

b. [...] she just had to buy an ASHTRAY [...]

PROSODIC EMPHASIS ON *ashtray*

Faster probe recognition times upon hearing (1b) as compared to (1a).

→ Prosodic prominence increases concept activation.

Probe recognition \approx e.g. naming, deciding whether it was mentioned

ALTERNATIVES AND MEMORY (SPALEK ET AL. 2014)

The “contrast hypothesis”

Spalek et al. 2014: 70

Focus sensitive particles make focus alternatives more prominent because they become relevant for semantic (not just pragmatic) interpretation.

Materials (auditory, German)

(2) a. *Context (speaker 1):*

In the fruit bowl, there are peaches, cherries, and bananas. I bet Carsten ate cherries and bananas.

b. *Target (speaker 2):*

- | | | |
|-------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| (i) | No, he only ate PEACHES. | ONLY |
| (ii) | No, he even ate PEACHES. | EVEN |
| (iii) | No, he ate PEACHES. | NO PARTICLE |

Task: After 10 trials, the participants responded to the question ‘Which fruits were in the fruit bowl?’

ALTERNATIVES AND MEMORY (SPALEK ET AL. 2014)

Hypothesis confirmed: The presence of a focus sensitive particle facilitates the recall of focus alternatives.

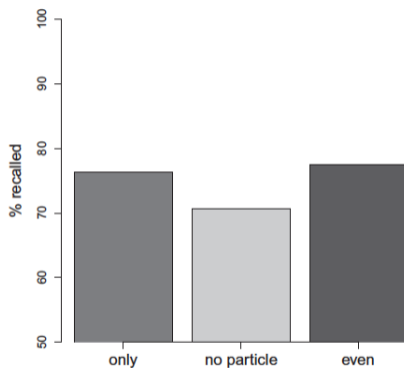


Figure: Results of Exp. 1 in Spalek et al. 2014

SUMMARY OF THIS BLOCK OF LECTURES

- What is the role of prosodic focus in question–answer pairs?
 - Prosodic focus is a means of discourse coherence; it helps discourse participants navigate the discourse and get oriented in it.
- How is prosodic focus semantically represented?
 - The semantics of focus involves alternatives, i.e., alternative denotations, which contrast with the focused constituent and remain constant in the background.
- What other uses of focus (beyond Q–A pairs) are there?
 - If prosodic focus is combined with so-called focus-sensitive particles (*only, also, even*), it contributes more than just to pragmatics (discourse coherence), but also to semantics (new entailments and presuppositions).
- Is there psychological reality to the concept of focus?
 - Prosodic focus facilitates concept activation.
 - Focus sensitive particles facilitate recall of focus alternatives, presumably by making them not just pragmatically, but also semantically relevant.

REFERENCES

Gernsbacher, M. A. & J. D. Jescheniak. 1995. Cataphoric devices in spoken discourse. *Cognitive Psychology* 29(1). 24–58. <https://doi.org/10.1006/cogp.1995.1011>.

Spalek, Katharina, Nicole Gotzner & Isabell Wartenburger. 2014. Not only the apples: Focus sensitive particles improve memory for information-structural alternatives. *Journal of Memory and Language* 70. 68–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2013.09.001>.