Cues for Subject Identification in a Swiss German Dialect: Integrating Socio- and Psycholinguistic Perspectives

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Method

- Sentence interpretation test with a who-did-it-task: Participants were asked to identify the actor in each sentence.
- Auditory stimuli consisting of simple transitive sentences:
  
  dr Schmetterling grüßt dr Schnägg (the butterfly greets the snail)
  d Hüet beobachtet d Geiss (the hats observes the goat)

Participants:
24 Bernese German native speakers

Four factors were systematically manipulated within participants:
- Word order: NVN, NNV, VNN
- Animacy: animate/animate, animate/inanimate, inanimate/animate
- Agreement: agreement with both nouns, agreement with 1st noun, agreement with 2nd noun
- Stress: no stress, stress on 1st noun, stress on 2nd noun

Results

In 1380 of 1944 responses the first noun of the sentence was identified as the actor (71%).

A logit-loglinear analysis revealed significant

- main effects for word order and agreement
- interactions between word order and agreement, word order, animacy and stress, as well as between all factors

Discussion

The results indicate that Bernese German speakers rely more strongly on word order and agreement, and less on animacy. In contrast, Standard German speakers rely predominantly on animacy and agreement (MacWhinney, Bates, & Kliegl, 1984). Thus, even though Bernese German and Standard German are varieties of the same language and very similar from a psycholinguistic perspective, the two varieties clearly differ with regard to the hierarchy of cues relevant for sentence interpretation. Probably, this is due to small grammatical differences between the varieties, such as the absence of accusative marking for masculine nouns in Bernese German.

This finding further emphasizes the need to include non-standard varieties in psycholinguistic research, and shows that results obtained for a standard language do not necessarily apply to other varieties.

References


Research question

Does the cue hierarchy for subject identification in Standard German sentence interpretation also apply to the Bernese German dialect?