CANONICITY, VERB TYPE AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN THE PROCESSING OF ITALIAN WORD ORDER

Listanti, Andrea[12], Torregrossa, Jacopo[2], Lago, Sol[2]
[1]Università di Trento, [2]Goethe University Frankfurt am Main
andrea.listanti@gmail.com

Abstract

Non-canonical word orders are usually harder to process than canonical ones. However, previous studies show that such difficulty can be alleviated if non-canonical configurations are licensed by an appropriate discourse context (Bader & Meng 2023; Kaiser & Trueswell 2004). Can syntactic factors further modulate the way non-canonical structures are processed within the discourse? We addressed this question in a speeded acceptability judgment task that manipulated position of the subject (preverbal vs. postverbal), focus conditions (broad vs. narrow) and verb type (unaccusative vs. transitive) in Italian declarative sentences. The canonical subject position in Italian is preverbal. Postverbal subjects are available with all verb classes, but their distribution differs according to the type of verb they follow. Postverbal subjects following a transitive verb are used in speech in narrow-focus conditions, i.e., when they correspond to the only informationally-new sentence constituent. Meanwhile, postverbal subjects following an unaccusative verb may be also used when the entire sentence is new. We are testing Italian native speakers' sensitivity to these syntactic and discourse-related factors in word order processing. In line with our expectations, the results of 24 pilot participants show that postverbal subjects are only accepted in narrow focus conditions with transitive verbs, but across the board with unaccusative verbs. Interestingly, sentences with canonical preverbal subjects are accepted similarly across verb types and focus conditions. This outcome points to the role of canonicity as a stronger cue for processing than information-structure appropriateness.

Keywords: word order, postverbal subject, Italian, speeded acceptability judgment, information structure

References

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