Answers to the Perception of Thematic Contrast and Questions regarding the Perception of Thematic “Non-Contrast”

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Abstract

In a previous production study [1] we explored the prosodic marking of thematic material in contrastive and non-contrastive contexts in German. While both conditions resulted in a prenuclear rise, we found that themes in contrastive context exhibited a significantly longer stressed vowel, together with a higher and later peak. Interestingly, speakers varied as to whether they used peak alignment, peak height or both for signalling thematic contrast. This might indicate that there is a continuum in contrast-marking rather than distinct accent categories.

In this paper we shall describe several perception studies that investigate which of the factors are important to make an utterance appropriate in contrastive and non-contrastive contexts. More specifically, we explored duration and (extent and temporal alignment of) f0-movement in German prenuclear accents.

Results show that subjects have clear perceptual preferences in contrastive contexts which disappear in non-contrastive contexts. We therefore conclude that contrastive contexts impose strong constraints on intonational form whereas non-contrastive contexts seem to be rather under-specified which gives room for alternative interpretation. Obviously, this conclusion is problematic for semantic theories. If themes in both contrastive and non-contrastive contexts may be intonationally marked, the assumed direct link between intonational marking and contrastive interpretation becomes questionable.

1. Introduction

Most studies that investigate the phonetic properties of contrast aim at rhematic (newness) accents (e.g. [2, 3]) while research on thematic (given) accents is rather rare (e.g. [4]). This is surprising, given the growing interest of semanticists in contrastive themes (cf. [5, 6, 7]), especially with respect to their force to prising, given the growing interest of semanticists in contrastive contexts. We therefore investigated how different theme marking (and the accompanying rhyme marking) influences perception. Our main aim is to explore the phonetic factors that contribute most to the perception of contrast and whose absence is most likely to induce a “non-contrastive” percept and/or a “neutral interpretation”.

In sec. 2 we describe the perception of peak height and peak alignment in contrastive contexts. In sec. 3, the focus is shifted to non-contrastive contexts. There, we first motivate a modification of the stimuli before describing the actual experiment. In this main experiment, the perceptual influence of peak height and segmental duration is explored. Because the use of modified stimuli makes a direct comparison to the first perception experiment impossible, we summarise a control study that tests the perception of the new stimuli in contrastive context.

2. Themes in contrastive contexts

In a first experiment, subjects were asked to judge the appropriateness of resynthesised stimuli in contrastive contexts. As contrast “triggers”, we used semantic parallelism, such as ‘Marlene loves the sea, but Anna likes to go to the mountains’. In order to reduce the complexity of the differences found in the production study [1], we concentrated on the manipulation of the f0-movement in the prenuclear rise.

2.1. Method

Four versions of a rise were resynthesised in five different utterances using Praat [8], resulting in one version presumed to be non-contrastive (nc) and three versions presumed to be contrastive in varying degrees (see fig. 1).

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Figure 1: Schematic figure of the four resynthesised thematic rises of a female voice. Early-low is presumed to be non-contrastive, all other versions are presumed to be contrastive. The shaded areas mark the stressed syllables.

The choice of these four versions was guided by idealisations of the production data. While the thematic rises were manipulated, the rhematic part was kept constant as an ‘H+L’ (au-
tosegmental annotation, cf. [10]; following [17], we also refer to this accent as early accent). This was the rhyme accent type most commonly found in the production data. Since flat hat patterns (cf. [6, 9]) were rare in the production data, we resynthesised a short dip before the ‘H±L’ (180Hz in the syllable proceeding the ‘H-syllable which was set at 200Hz).

16 linguistically naïve German subjects heard all 20 stimuli in random order. They were told to rate the appropriateness of the melody of the test utterances in the given context of a parallel construction using a seven-point scale. Also, they were explicitly told to ignore the actual content of the sentences and any unnaturalness resulting from resynthesis. Sentences are similar to the following one (where “Marlene” was manipulated):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual presentation:</th>
<th>Anna liebt das Meer, aber . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Auditory presentation:</td>
<td>‘Anna loves the sea but . . .’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Marlene fährt gern in die Berge.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first half of the parallel construction was presented visually, followed by three dots to indicate the continuation. After clicking a loud-speaker symbol on the screen, the subjects heard a resynthesised continuation to the utterance. Five training examples were presented to familiarise subjects with the speech stimuli and the task.

We are well aware of the criticism of unnaturalness and the uncontrollable effects of visual presentation but we believe that parallel constructions are syntactically and semantically sufficiently marked to constrain the degrees of interpretational and intonational freedom. In not resynthesizing the first part of the parallel construction, we avoid the as-yet-rather-unexplored territory of inter-clause peak-height relations.

### 2.2. Hypotheses

We predicted that the non-contrastive version (early-low) would be rated significantly worse than all contrastive versions in the given contrastive context. Furthermore, it was hypothesised that a stronger marking of contrast (by both higher and later peak) would give higher appropriateness judgements than just one contrastive “feature” alone (higher or later peak). That is, we assumed the following preference ratings:

\[
\text{late-high > early-high = late-low > early-low}
\]

### 2.3. Results

Normalised ratings were analysed using the non-parametric Friedman test and a Wilcoxon signed ranks test for post-hoc analysis. Surprisingly, we found two groups of subjects whose rating differed significantly F(3,234)=5.09, p=0.02 (ANOVA with rise-type as within-subjects factor). The rating behaviour of one group (4 subj.) was not consistent; so they are not discussed further here. Preference ratings of the larger group (12 subjects) differed significantly (χ²=28, df=3, p=0.000), so we concentrate on them. We found a significant preference for all contrastive versions over the non-contrastive stimuli which supports our main hypothesis. However, the hypothesised preference grouping (preference for late-high over both early-high and late-low) was not observed:

\[
\text{early-high = late-high > late-low > early-low}
\]

2Throughout the article, ‘>’ stands for “significantly preferred over (p<0.05)” while ‘=’ means “no significant difference”.

### 2.4. Discussion

Versions with high peaks formed one group that was rated best. In these versions, alignment differences played no role for appropriateness, which might be due to a ceiling effect. Late-low peak versions were judged worse than both high peak versions but still differ significantly from the non-contrastive one (early-low). It appears that the peak alignment (or the accompanying lower trough) is crucial only for the interpretation of low peaks.

The primacy of peak height over peak alignment found here is in line with other studies, e.g. Bartels and Kingston who summarise that “peak height was found to be by far the most salient cue to contrastiveness.” [3, p. 1]. It is worth noticing, however, that the importance of the scaling of accents on perception has been largely ignored in autosegmental tonal categories [10, 11] and is acknowledged only in perceptually-oriented annotation schemes, like the British School (e.g. [12]).

The fact that subjects rated both high versions (early-high and late-high) equally good allows for speculations about the impact of overall f₀-exursion on perception. Overall f₀-exursion is greater in the late-high versions but these are not rated better. Both high versions, in fact, have a steeper slope of the rise compared to the versions with low peaks which might be the reason for the observed preference pattern. [3] also suggested that the slope may be important for perception.

The results suggest a kind of trading relation between peak height and peak alignment which mirrors the variance found in production (there, 42% of the contrastive–noncontrastive pairs showed both peak height and peak alignment differences, 15% only peak alignment differences and 29% only peak height differences). Surprisingly, the combination of higher and later peaks which was most common in production was not preferred most in perception.

### 3. Themes in non-contrastive contexts

In this first experiment we asked subjects to judge the appropriateness of a test utterance in a contrastive context (parallel construction). We found that listeners significantly preferred the presumed contrastive versions over the presumed non-contrastive ones. In this section we discuss the perception in non-contrastive context where the opposite preference pattern might be expected. It became necessary to perform some informal pilot studies (sec. 3.1) that motivate the refinement of the stimuli used. Sec. 3.2 describes the actual perception experiment in non-contrastive contexts. In sec. 3.3 we replicate the first experiment with the modified stimuli to be able to compare the results. These are described and discussed in 3.5 and 3.6.

#### 3.1. Pilot study

On the basis of some informal experiments we concluded that the duration of the stressed syllable is an important contributing factor in the perception of “non-contrast”, an issue that we haven’t accounted for so far. Consequently, in the following pilot experiment we manipulated the variables peak height and duration rather than peak height and alignment. Note that what we treated as alignment effects in the first study could actually have been due to differences in duration.

For the manipulation of f₀-movement we used those versions that yielded best and worst appropriateness values in the study with contrastive context (early-high and early-low in fig. 1). The duration of the whole preverbal constituent (prosodic word, including articles or prepositions) of the existing stimuli was shortened to 80% according to the results of
the production study. Since slope seemed to be important for perception (which was also emphasised by [3]), it was held constant across duration conditions. Similarly, the alignment of the $f_0$-minimum (L) was kept constant, according to various studies that found a consistent alignment of L with the segmental structure (e.g. [13, 14]). This resulted in a slightly later peak in conditions with shorter constituents.

To establish a non-contrastive context, we decided to use focus-inducing questions. These were recorded in a way that the constituent that would end up as the pre-verbal (thematic) material of the answer (= target-utterance) was intonationally marked as given in the corresponding question (by deaccenting it). Following [5], thematic parts are labelled with $[g \ldots ]$, while the rhematic, new parts with $[a \ldots ]$ (capital letters mark the nuclear pitch accent, the focus-exponent).

Question: Was $[g$ MACHT]$[a$ Marlene]$[\ldots ]$ denn gerne?

Answer: $[a$ Marlene]$[\ldots ]$ Ist $[g$ INTERESTED]$[\ldots ]$ in?

Most of the eight subjects were highly irritated by the rhematic $\texttt{IH+L}$ on the focus-exponent (here: “Berge”) although this was the accent most often found in the production data. Furthermore, Kohler described the semantics of such early rhematic accents as denoting “established facts” [17] which would be a valid interpretation in the examples used (but one that subjects rejected for some reason). They complained that the “main accent” was not “strong enough” and that the utterance was “wrongly accented”. There was no significant preference for any of the resynthesised versions which might be caused by the “inappropriate” rhyme accent or by an insufficient context.

3.2. Method

Based on previous experience the stimuli were resynthesised with medial rhyme accents (terminology by [17], corresponding to autosegmental H* ) to make the thematic part more appropriate to the question. The nuclear syllable with set at 205Hz, the preceding syllable at 180Hz. As described above, stimuli varied in both $f_0$-movement and segmental duration. Furthermore, we started to use magnitude estimation instead of the seven-segmental duration. Furthermore, we used the same material (manipulation of both duration and $f_0$, medial thematic accent) and method as in non-contrastive contexts. There were two orders of presentation: one starting with the non-contrastive context and one starting with the contrastive context (23 subjects altogether). With this control study we further aim to discover whether a different sort of rhyme accent influences perception in contrastive contexts as well. In the following sections, the results for the contrastive context and the non-contrastive context are presented and discussed in parallel.

3.3. Control study: medial rhyme and contrastive context

To allow direct comparison of the influence of duration and $f_0$-movement on preference ratings in different contexts we replicated the above experiment in contrastive contexts (visual presentation of parallel construction). We used the same material (manipulation of both duration and $f_0$, medial thematic accent) and method as in non-contrastive contexts. There were two orders of presentation: one starting with the non-contrastive context and one starting with the contrastive context (23 subjects altogether). With this control study we further aim to discover whether a different sort of rhyme accent influences perception in contrastive contexts as well. In the following sections, the results for the contrastive context and the non-contrastive context are presented and discussed in parallel.

3.4. Hypotheses

Non-contrastive context: According to the results of the production study we hypothesised that the less marked themes should be more appropriate in non-contrastive contexts. As both low-long and high-short contain just one cue to prominence we assumed that they would be grouped together:

\[ \text{low-long} > \text{low-long} = \text{high-short} > \text{high-long} \]

Contrastive context: For the contrastive control study we expected the opposite pattern, again assuming that $f_0$-movement and duration are additive factors:

\[ \text{high-long} > \text{high-short} = \text{low-long} > \text{low-short} \]

3.5. Results

Magnitude estimation values were logarithmised (log$_{10}$) and normalised. In contrast to the ratings in the previous studies these are scalar data which can be analysed using parametric tests. To investigate whether the order of presentation (contrastive first vs. non-contrastive first) had an influence on the rating behaviour in the two contexts, we calculated two ANOVAs with rise-type as within-subject factor (with the four conditions $\text{low-short}$, $\text{low-long}$, $\text{high-short}$ and $\text{high-long}$) and presentation-order as between-subject factor, one for contrastive and one for non-contrastive contexts. In non-contrastive contexts, there was a significant interaction between presentation-order and rise ($F(3,276)=3.57, p=0.015$). Therefore only the results of the group that first performed the non-contrastive task were analysed (15 subjects). In the contrastive contexts, there was no significant interaction between order and rise, so ratings were pooled (23 subjects).

Non-contrastive context: In non-contrastive contexts, there was no consistent preference across subjects, similar to the results of the pilot study reported in sec. 3.1.

Contrastive context: First, the use of a medial rhyme accent (as opposed to the early rhyme accent in the first experiment (sec. 2)) had no influence on subjects’ ability to perform the task. There was a significant difference in preference for the four versions in contrastive contexts ($F(3,282)=6.41, p=0.000$). Subjects showed a clear preference for versions with a high prenuclear peak over versions with a lower one (as expected). However, contrary to expectation, duration and $f_0$-movement did not turn out to be additive factors:

\[ \text{high-long} = \text{high-short} > \text{low-long} = \text{low-short} \]

\footnote{The same preferences and significances are found in smaller data sets (e.g. with the first 15 subjects ($F(3,165)=4.51, p=0.000$)).}
3.6. Discussion

A ‘wrong’ kind of rhyme accent impaired subjects’ ability to rate the stimuli in non-contrastive context. In contrastive contexts, the kind of rhyme accent did not matter. This difference might be partly explained by the visual presentation of the parallel constructions which allows more intonational freedom than the rigid question in non-contrastive contexts. It is interesting to compare this to the production data where we also found a significant difference in the distribution of rhyme accents ($\chi^2=9.64, df=1, p<0.01$) but in order reverse: in contrastive contexts, there were significantly more early rhyme accents ($\chi^2=17.5, df=1, p <0.01$), while medial and early rhyme accents were equally distributed in non-contrastive contexts.

In contrastive contexts, the acceptability was solely based on f0-movement, not on duration. This is no surprise given that f0-exursion is not influenced by different speaking rates [13]. That is, segmental duration can be shortened which need not affect the extent of f0-movement. Peak height (and slope) were most important for the perception of thematic contrast, but these factors cannot be described in autosegmental terms.

It is surprising that subjects found all versions equally appropriate in the neutral, non-contrastive contexts. [19] similarly found that in clearly marked neutral (declarative) contexts, marked forms (questions) were accepted but seen as carrying additional meaning (e.g. emphasis). Since the opposite does not apply, non-contrastive contexts can also be seen as prosodically under-specified so that they can give room for alternative functions of prosody (e.g. impatience, strong opinion).

A further explanation is that subjects “repair” the context to accommodate for the perceived contrast [5, 20]. In a preliminary study we tried to investigate whether our results are mainly due to accommodation or to alternative functions of prosody. We therefore asked a small group of subjects to choose the presumed inappropriate prosody. We therefore asked a small group of subjects to choose the presumed inappropriate prosody.

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5. References


