

Project A03: The creative listener: Interpretation at the interface of prosody, syntax and information structure

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Project Summary

This project is concerned with the interpretation of utterances where the information structure and/or prosody of an utterance do not match a given context. The main question is how and under which circumstances such mismatches are taken to be meaningful and give rise to creative interpretation adjustments. For example, when a contrastive accent does not match the corresponding question and appears misplaced, listeners might use prosodic cues to enrich meaning, similar to what is usually assumed for pragmatic inferences based on violations of Gricean maxims of conversations. We are interested in formal markings such as (morpho-)syntax or prosody potentially giving rise to meaning adjustments.

Given the ever-present variation within the domain of prosody, it is highly likely that mismatches as described above occur and need to be resolved frequently by listeners in everyday interaction. Similarly, syntax may optionally provide additional cues for resolving information structure and, depending on the language, listeners may have different sets of cues that lead to differences in creative interpretation. The project therefore specifically targets the interface between information structure, prosody, and syntax, while focusing on mismatches between prosody, information-structural and (morpho-)syntactic marking, and context information in different dialogue settings.

We expect that creative interpretation by listeners depends on the nature and number of mismatches and is shaped by different grammatical systems under investigation. Therefore, the interfaces are investigated for a set of typologically different languages (English, German, Hungarian, Urdu) that are structured differently with respect to information-structural markings and (morpho-)syntax, and consequently, the interfaces between them.

We look at a range of different types of mismatching inputs (context-prosody mismatches, context- (morpho-)syntax-prosody mismatches, and lexical-prosodic mismatches) to contribute to an analysis of listeners' treatment of mismatching input.

Instances of creative interpretations will be studied within different types of experimental tasks (rating, picture-selection) as well as task-oriented, collaborative dialogue settings, where an adequate interpretation is crucial for communication.

Open Positions

2 PhD position (65%)

Profile: The ideal candidates have a master in linguistics (or a related field) with a focus on phonetics/phonology, syntax or information structure. Linguistic knowledge of Urdu or Hungarian is highly desirable.

Main research focus within the project: The two PhDs will each work on two languages of the four languages under consideration (e.g. German and Hungarian, Urdu and English) and investigate focus structures/clefts and prosodic marking in a range of different contexts.

For further information please contact the project leaders:

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