

Processing of morphosyntactic variants: the role of speaking style and genre

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Previous research has shown that talker identity and speaking style affect the processing of morphosyntactic variants. Non-standard variants (e.g. gender agreement errors) spoken by a non-native speaker showed distinct neural responses compared to the same variants spoken by a native speaker (Hanulíková et al. 2012). Similar effects have been shown by contrasting variants spoken in casual and careful speaking styles (Viebahn et al. 2017). The present study extends this line of research to morphosyntactic variants (case variation in prepositional phrases) that tend to be associated with distinct speaking styles by comparing processing of written and spoken language in two different genres and speaking styles.

German prepositional phrases with prepositions *wegen* “because of” and *während* “during” show a substantial variation concerning their case government with genitive and dative. Some German grammars as well as corpus studies indicate that the degree of text and genre formality contributes to some of the variation (Koch & Oesterreicher 2007; Scott 2014). Using self-paced reading (SPR) and a sentence repetition/completion task, we examined the extent to which processing of these variants is modulated by genre or speaking style.

In the SPR experiment, we expected a processing benefit for the genitive variants in a formal newspaper context as compared to an informal genre of online blogs (cf. Squires, 2018). Preliminary results indicate that, regardless of genre, participants (n = 70, mean age = 23) read the noun region faster with the dative than with the genitive variant in sentences with *wegen*, while there was no difference in sentences with *während*. A four-way interaction between genre, case, preposition, and experiment half in the spillover region suggests that participants tended to adjust their reading behavior depending on genre. In the sentence repetition and completion task, participants (20 young adults, mean age = 22; 27 older adults, mean age = 64) were familiarized with two talkers (one with a careful and one with a casual pronunciation), and then asked to repeat sentences spoken by these talkers. Critical case markers were replaced by white noise. Results showed a main effect of talker across both age groups, suggesting that speaking style modulates expectations and the subsequent responses. A main effect of talker block and an interaction with the order of talker presentation indicate that participants adjusted their responses throughout the experiment. Participants reported the genitive variant more frequently in the second block and particularly when the carefully speaking talker was presented first. These findings have implications for the study of morphosyntactic variation and expectation-based language processing.

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