

Grammar in the background

– attention during reading

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This article reports on a psycholinguistic study of two sets of linguistic mechanisms that are employed by language users to signal the intended prioritization of attention within complex messages: focus and the lexicon-grammar contrast. The study is one of the first experimental studies of the lexicon-grammar contrast which is theoretically anchored and not merely based on an intuition-based understanding of grammar. The focus of a sentence is indicated by means of focus markers, e.g. cleft constructions and focus particles. There is a general consensus, supported by experimental results, that focus is involved in the above-mentioned form of prioritization. On the other hand, the lexicon-grammar contrast has only recently been related to prioritization of attention. A recent theory of grammar (Boye and Harder 2012) suggests that grammatical elements, such as auxiliaries and articles, are low-priority items that only serve an ancillary purpose. The reported study is centered on a letter detection task with 84 Danish participants, in which structural status (lexical vs. grammatical) and focal status (focus vs. non-focus) of elements were manipulated. While the focus manipulation did not affect error detection rates, structural status (as defined by Boye and Harder 2012) did: Grammatical elements attracted less attention (generated significantly more detection errors) than their lexical counterparts. A post hoc mixed model analysis also showed a significant interaction between focal and structural status, but the robustness and exact nature of this interaction effect is a question for future research.