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Can Demonstratives be Discourse Topics? Evidence from German Right Dislocation

Mi 15.00-15.30

It has been claimed that demonstrative NPs are used anaphorically to refer to non-discourse topics (Zifonun e.a. 1997, Bosch/Katz/Umbach forthc., Consten/Schwarz-Friesel forthc.). However, the non-discourse topic constraint can be overridden by 'cognitive proximity' (cf. Averintseva-Klisch/Consten 2006). In this case, the demonstrative use indicates speaker's emotional involvement with his topic, for example in order to give a negative evaluation of the referent. This claim is tested in considering the use of demonstratives in the German Right-Dislocation construction (RD). RD is a clear-cut grammatical means of marking discourse topicality (cf. Averintseva-Klisch forthc. a, b). Thus, RD-constructions are good material for analyzing the interdependency of discourse topicality and demonstrative reference. We will present a questionnaire study conducted to test the possibility of demonstrative reference to discourse topics. We will discuss the following factors which might interact to allow or disallow the demonstrative marking of the RD-NP

1) The status of the referent of the NP as new or old discourse topic. RD can (i) either confirm the respective referent as the ongoing discourse topic, or (ii) RD establishes its referent as the discourse topic of the beginning discourse segment. The use of demonstratives as right-dislocated constituents should be restricted to (ii)-cases.

2) Cognitive proximity: Demonstrative reference to established discourse topics is possible if the RD-NP provides an additional, more specific description of the speaker's attitude towards the referent. Moreover, emotive specification even by mere demonstrativity (i.e, without giving an additional specification by lexical content) is possible.

3) Change of point of view which leads to a kind of re-focussing of the ongoing discourse topic.

We argue that demonstrativity with RDs is allowed functioning as follows: 1) marking a change of discourse topic, 2) emphasizing a lexical content of the head noun that specifies the speaker's attitude towards the referent, 3) first-time specifying the speaker's attitude towards the referent by mere demonstrativity ((2) and 3) being instances of cognitive proximity). Surprisingly, this latter function turned out to be the most significant one.

In general, these results are consistent with our claim that the demonstrative bias for non-discourse topics can be overridden by cognitive proximity. A general preference for demonstratives we observed with RDs requires further investigation.

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