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Focus particles in Germanic and Romance languages: Can facultative linguistic categories shape perspective-taking in discourse?

This contribution presents collaborative work issued from the international research project LANGACROSS (Utterance structure in context: Language and cognition during acquisition in a cross-linguistic perspective) that looks into language specific principles of information organization and perspective taking in discourse.

Whereas the bulk of the work adopting the idea that there is partly language specific Thinking for Speaking (Slobin 1996) rests on the idea that mainly obligatory linguistic categories shape speakers' preferences for discourse organization (e.g. Klein/von Stutterheim 2002), the present paper asks whether facultative linguistic categories like additive or contrastive particles can have similar effects on the choice of a preferred discourse perspective. I will first present findings on the use of focus particles and other markers of polarity contrast in elicited production data of speakers of French, Italian, Dutch and German. Results show that polarity contrasts are systematically focused and chosen as a means to enhance discourse coherence in the Germanic languages, whereas they are integrated in the propositional content and rarely encoded on a separate layer of information structure in the Romance languages (Dimroth/ Adorno/Benazzo/Verhagen 2010). In the following I will discuss ongoing experimental work trying to find out if the ease with which speakers manage to access different layers of information structure is mediated by their native language as well.