

Object fronting and contrast in German and Swedish

Marta Wierzba (wierzba@uni-potsdam)
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This research is part of a cross-linguistic collaboration:
- Gisbert Fanselow & Marta Wierzba (German)
- Sara Myrberg (Swedish)

SVO ←————→ OVS

Main research questions:

- How do **subject-initial** V2 clauses differ from **object-initial** ones?
 - Do fronted objects need to be **contrastive**?
 - Do Germanic languages **differ** in this respect?
- cross-linguistic acceptability rating study

The prefield position

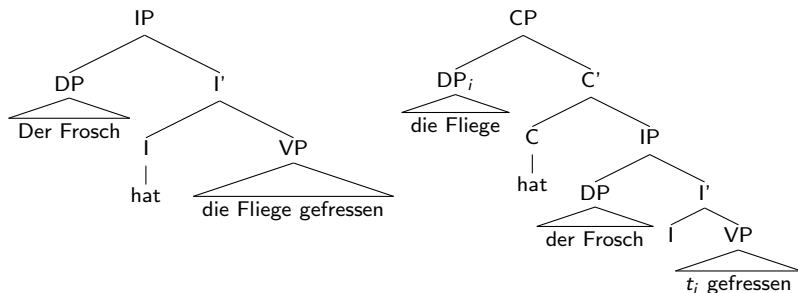
- Subjects occur in the prefield more frequently in both German and Swedish.
- In Swedish, the difference is more pronounced.

	German	Swedish
subjects / expletives	50%	73%
objects	7%	3%
temp. / loc. adverbs	17%	14%
other adverbials	25%	9%

Data from Bohnacker & Rosén's (2007) corpus of informal letters.

The prefield position

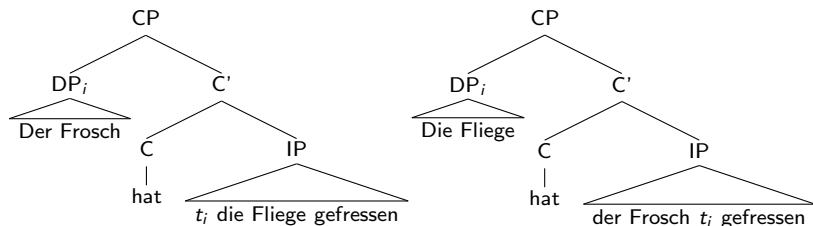
Travis (1984) argues for a **structural asymmetry** between subject-initial V2 clauses (IPs) and object-initial ones (CPs) in order to account for the fact that the latter are **more restricted**.



Der Frosch hat die Fliege gefressen. *'The frog has eaten the fly.'*

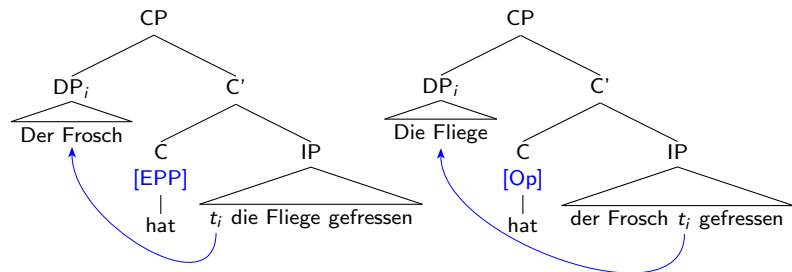
The prefield position

In other approaches, **structural symmetry** is assumed (e.g. Thiersch 1978, Fanselow 2004).



The prefield position

In a structurally symmetrical analysis, the fact that object-initial sentences are more restricted can be accounted for by the assumption that **different operations** (*unspecific formal feature vs. specific operator feature*) are involved.



Operator features that have been proposed to be relevant: **wh**, **focus**, **topic** (Fanselow 2004), **contrast**, **emphasis** (Frey 2005, 2010).

The prefield position

More specifically, Frey (2005, 2010) proposes for German to distinguish between...

- ...**Formal Movement**: attracts the closest phrase in the IP, without any semantic/pragmatic/prosodic restrictions.
- ...and **Genuine \bar{A} -Movement**: any phrase can be attracted, and it will receive a contrastive/emphatic interpretation and some prosodic prominence.

For an extension of the proposal to other Germanic languages, see Light (2012).

The prefield position

- Typically, the “closest” (highest) phrase in the IP will be the subject or a high adverbial; however, especially given/topical constituents can be scrambled to a high position and undergo Formal Movement from there.
- Possible consequence: the **contrastive requirement** might be **more important for new/focused objects**, as they are less easy to scramble.
- A similar prediction emerges from Molnár & Winkler’s (2010) system involving the C(ohere)nce)-feature, which can be specified as positive by the presence of continuity and/or contrast.

Contrast

Is **contrast** an **independent information-structural notion**, orthogonal to focus and topic?

	contrast	no contrast
focus	contrastive focus	non-contrastive focus
topic	contrastive topic	non-contrastive topic

Contrast

Is **contrast** an **independent information-structural notion**, orthogonal to focus and topic?

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focus	contrastive focus	non-contrastive focus
topic	contrastive topic	non-contrastive topic

Following Molnár (2006), the crucial questions are:

- 1 Are **focus** and **contrast** distinct notions?

Focus involves alternatives & contrast involves alternatives

- 2 Are **topic** and **contrast** compatible notions?

Topics are given/presupposed \leftrightarrow contrast is highlighting

Contrast

Is **contrast** an **independent information-structural notion**, orthogonal to focus and topic?

	contrast	no contrast
focus	contrastive focus	non-contrastive focus
topic	contrastive topic	non-contrastive topic

Following Molnár (2006), the crucial questions are:

1 Are **focus** and **contrast** distinct notions?

Focus involves alternatives & contrast involves alternatives

2 Are **topic** and **contrast** compatible notions?

Topics are given/presupposed ↔ contrast is highlighting

The **criterion for contrast** for the purposes of our study:

→ **presence of explicit alternatives** (cf. Jacobs 1988)

→ applicable to focus and topic

Specific research questions:

- Does contrast influence the availability of object fronting?
- Do we see the same effect across information-structural categories?
- Does it make a difference whether a fronted object is narrowly focused or part of a broader focus?
- Do we see the same patterns across different Germanic languages?

Experiment 1: focus

- **Contrast:** neutral question vs. correction
- **Word order:** subject in the prefield vs. object in the prefield
- **What is in focus:** narrow (object) vs. broad (VP) focus

Experiment 2: topic

- **Contrast:** aboutness topic vs. contrastive topic
- **Word order:** subject in the prefield vs. object in the prefield

Languages tested so far: German and Swedish.

Materials: German — exp. 1 (focus)

- GER a. **No contrast, narrow focus, SVO:**
Was haben die Männer repariert?
Die Männer haben eine Waschmaschine repariert.
- b. **Contrast, narrow focus, SVO:**
Haben die Männer die Heizung repariert?
Nein, die Männer haben eine Waschmaschine repariert.
- SWE a. **No contrast, narrow focus, SVO:**
Vad har männen lagat?
Männen har lagat en tvättmaskin.
- b. **Contrast, narrow focus, SVO:**
Har männen lagat ett element?
Nej, männen har lagat en tvättmaskin.

Materials: German — exp. 1 (focus)

- GER c. **No contrast, broad focus, SVO:**
Warum steht der Werkzeugkasten hier? Was haben die Männer gemacht?
Die Männer haben eine Waschmaschine repariert.
- d. **Contrast, broad focus, SVO:**
Warum steht der Werkzeugkasten hier? Haben die Männer Fenster eingesetzt?
Nein, die Männer haben eine Waschmaschine repariert.
- SWE c. **No contrast, broad focus, SVO:**
Varför ligger verktygslådan framme? Vad har männen gjort?
Männen har lagat en tvättmaskin.
- d. **Contrast, broad focus, SVO:**
Varför ligger verktygslådan framme? Har männen satt upp nya fönster?
Nej, männen har lagat en tvättmaskin.

Materials: German — exp. 1 (focus)

- GER e. **No contrast, narrow focus, OVS:**
Was haben die Männer repariert?
Eine Waschmaschine haben die Männer repariert.
- f. **Contrast, narrow focus, OVS:**
Haben die Männer die Heizung repariert?
Nein, eine Waschmaschine haben die Männer repariert.
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Vad har männen lagat?
En tvättmaskin har männen lagat.
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Warum steht der Werkzeugkasten hier? Was haben die Männer gemacht?
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Varför ligger verktygslådan framme? Har männen satt upp nya fönster?
Nej, en tvättmaskin har männen lagat.

Materials: German — exp. 2 (topic)

- GER
- a. **Non-contrastive topic, SVO:**
Ich habe gehört, dass deine Orchidee beim Umzug kaputt gegangen ist. Was ist denn mit ihr passiert?
Meine Mitbewohner haben die Orchidee umgestoßen.
- b. **Contrastive topic, SVO:**
Ich habe gehört, dass deine Orchidee und dein Kaktus beim Umzug kaputt gegangen ist. Was ist denn mit ihnen passiert?
Meine Mitbewohner haben die Orchidee umgestoßen, und meine Mutter hat den Kaktus fallen lassen.
- SWE
- a. **Non-contrastive topic, SVO:**
Jag hörde att din orkidée gick av när du flyttade. Vad var det som hände med den?
Mina rumskompisar stötte till orkidéen.
- b. **Contrastive topic, SVO:**
Jag hörde att din orkidée och din kaktus gick av när du flyttade. Vad var det som hände med dem?
Mina rumskompisar stötte till orkidéen och min mamma råkade tappa kaktusen.

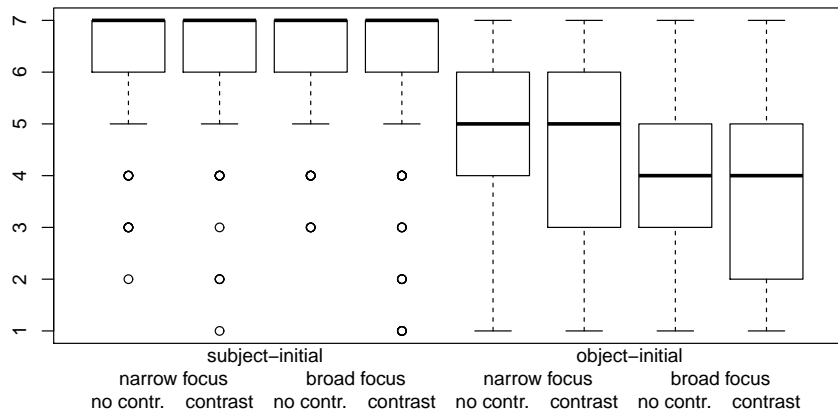
Materials: German — exp. 2 (topic)

- GER
- c. **Non-contrastive topic, OVS:**
Ich habe gehört, dass deine Orchidee beim Umzug kaputt gegangen ist. Was ist denn mit ihr passiert?
Die Orchidee haben meine Mitbewohner umgestoßen.
- d. **Contrastive topic, OVS:**
Ich habe gehört, dass deine Orchidee und dein Kaktus beim Umzug kaputt gegangen ist. Was ist denn mit ihnen passiert?
Die Orchidee haben meine Mitbewohner umgestoßen, und den Kaktus hat meine Mutter fallen lassen.
- SWE
- c. **Non-contrastive topic, OVS:**
Jag hörde att din orkidée gick av när du flyttade. Vad var det som hände med den?
Orkidéen stötte mina rumskompisar till.
- d. **Contrastive topic, OVS:**
Jag hörde att din orkidée och din kaktus gick av när du flyttade. Vad var det som hände med dem?
Orkidéen stötte mina rumskompisar till och kaktusen råkade min mamma tappa.

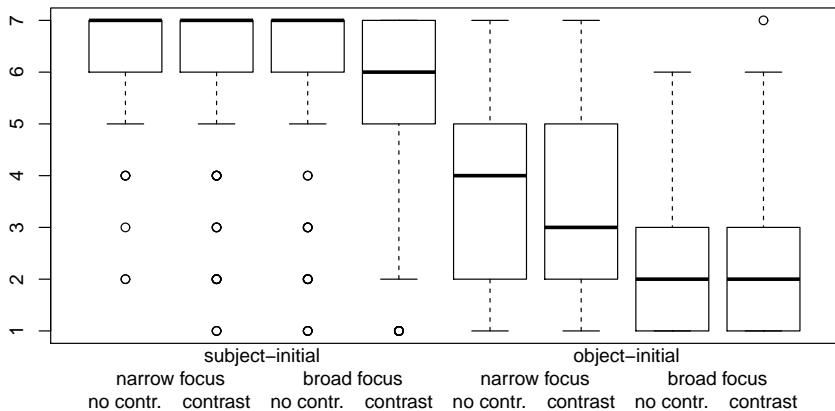
Participants and procedure

- 40 native speakers per language
- acceptability ratings on a 1–7 scale
- written materials
- online questionnaire using SoSci Survey (<https://www.soscisurvey.de/>)
- 88 dialogues per trial: 32 items from exp. 1, 16 items from exp. 2, and 40 fillers

Results: German — exp. 1 (focus)



Results: Swedish — exp. 1 (focus)



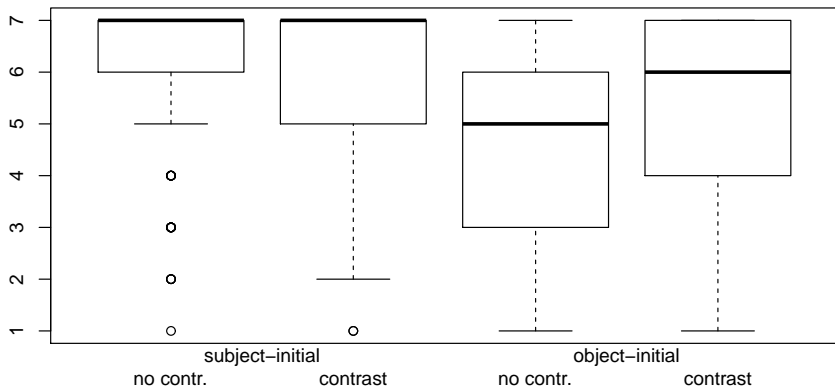
Results: exp. 1 (focus)

order focus contrast	subject-initial				object-initial			
	narrow		broad		narrow		broad	
	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes
German:								
abs. rating	6.44	6.35	6.37	6.01	5.07	4.64	4.25	3.74
z-scores	0.69	0.63	0.63	0.43	-0.19	-0.43	-0.71	-1.06
Swedish:								
abs. rating	6.54	6.15	6.12	5.71	3.77	3.24	2.60	2.24
z-scores	0.90	0.75	0.69	0.56	-0.33	-0.57	-0.89	-1.11

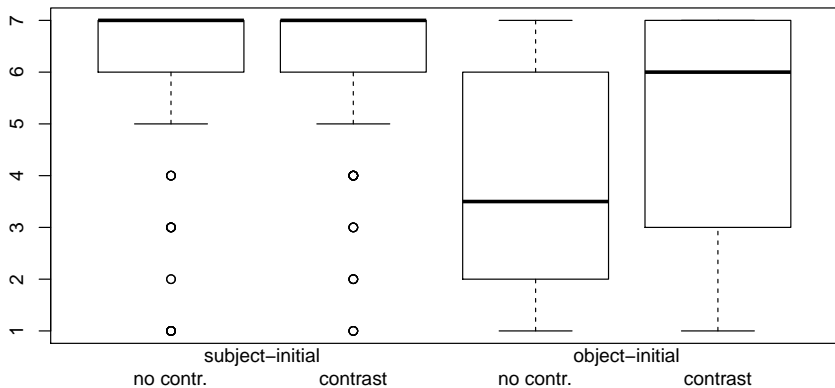
According to linear mixed models run separately for each language, there was a significant **interaction between word order and focus size** both in German ($t = 4.0$) and Swedish ($t = 3.6$): object-initial order is worse under broad focus.

There also was a **main effect of contrast** both in German ($t = 2.8$) and Swedish ($t = 3.2$): items with contrast were less acceptable than without.

Results: German — exp. 2 (topic)



Results: Swedish — exp. 2 (topic)



Results: exp. 2 (topic)

order contrast	subject-initial		object-initial	
	no	yes	no	yes
German:				
abs. rating	6.14	6.00	4.47	5.40
z-scores	0.40	0.34	-0.67	-0.08
Swedish:				
abs. rating	5.98	6.13	3.70	5.06
z-scores	0.38	0.44	-0.79	-0.05

According to linear mixed models run separately for each language, there was a significant **interaction between word order and contrast** both in German ($t = 5.6$) and Swedish ($t = 5.6$): object-initial order is better with contrast.

According to a linear mixed model run on **all data from German and Swedish**, the factor LANGUAGE only interacted with the factor WORD ORDER ($t = 3.3$) in experiment 1.

In experiment 2, there was neither a significant main effect of LANGUAGE nor a significant interaction with the other factors.

Summary

In our study, we found that...

- **...contrastively focussed objects** in the prefield are not more acceptable than non-contrastively focussed ones (at least for corrective focus).
 - **...contrastive topic objects** in the prefield are more acceptable than non-contrastive ones.
 - **...Swedish and German** show very similar relative patterns but differ in the overall availability of focus fronting.
- Contrast seems to play a similar role for object fronting in both languages.
- The data so far suggests that contrastive foci and contrastive topics behave differently in this respect (unexpected if contrast was an orthogonal notion and the crucial licensing factor), but the contrast manipulation was different in exp. 1 than in exp. 2.

Open questions: contrastive focus manipulation

The factor *CONTRAST* showed almost no effect in the focus experiments; the trend even goes in the direction that object fronting is worse with contrast than without.

- Was correction not the best type of contrast to chose?
- What would be better ways of manipulating contrast (ideally, in a more comparable way for both topics and foci)?

Open questions: non-contrastive topic fronting

The following example is reported to be a perfectly acceptable examples of a fronted non-contrastive topic (Elisabet Engdahl, p.c.)?

- (1) Berätta något om Johns senaste bok.
tell something about John's latest book
'Tell me something about John's latest book.'
Ja, **den boken** borde alla läsa.
yes **that book** ought all read
'Yes, everybody ought to read that book.'

It was pointed out to us that this might have to do with the presence of *den*.

Relatedly, Light (2012) argues that demonstrative elements are easier to front across Germanic languages and she accounts for that by an analysis according to which demonstratives are always contrastive. Is this the case in (1)?

Open questions: non-contrastive topic fronting

The following example from the web (<http://www.vasby.se/>) is reported to be perfectly acceptable:

(2) 2008 utnämndes Roland till “Årets Väsbybo”, [...]

In 2008, Roland was appointed Väsby citizen of the year [...]

Utmärkelsen fick han för sin insats [...] där han återförde en del av den vikingatida silverskatt som under 1800-talet hittades i Väsby.

The award, he received for this contribution [...] where he returned a part of the silver treasure from viking times that was found in Väsby during the 1800s.

Utmärkelsen fick han också för sitt omfattande arbete med att tillvarata över 300 kermaiska figurer [...]

The award, he also received for this extensive work in preserving over 300 ceramic figures [...]

Open questions: non-contrastive topic fronting

- Do you agree with these reported judgments?
- What could be the crucial difference to our experimental items that caused the non-contrastive topics to be rated as less than perfect?

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