Where's the Information? Analysis of a Spoken News Item

What makes news ‚news' is – first of all – the fact that it provides a (partial) answer to what Roberts (1996) has called the ‚Big Question': *What is the way things are?* Beyond this rather trivial insight, there are more requirements that a news story has to fulfill. Not any arbitrary sequence of – by itself informative – assertions makes for a coherent news item. Stories intuitively „make sense" if and only if we are able to construe them in the form of discourse trees which are organised along the lines of increasingly specific questions, or questions which bear a complementary relation to each other. (The questions are usually not contained in the text itself but must be reconstructed.) A discourse structure like this, in turn, puts constraints on the internal organisation of assertions, their information structure. We call the informative part of an assertion – the one which provides the actual answer – a *focus.* There are two types of informativity: either an answer to a question consists of completely new, unexpected linguistic material, or the answer represents a choice from a set of aforementioned or otherwise salient alternatives. (I argue that this is the defining distinction between non-contrastive and contrastive focus.)

I will present the analysis of a German spoken news item along the lines of an annotation system (Baumann & Riester 2012, Riester & Baumann 2013) which examines in detail the informative contribution of each word and each syntactic phrase. Furthermore, a discourse tree is construed reflecting what is *at-issue* (Potts 2005, Simons et al. 2010) at each step of the discourse. In addition to the main structure, texts contain supplemental material (e.g. explanations for the addressee), which are expressed by what I call *not-at-issue foci.* Although the analysis is not based on the spoken signal but on its written transcript, it is able to account for many prosodic properties of the spoken realisation. A comparison between different realisations of the same news item (different news broadcasts) reveals remarkable prosodic homogeneity. In cases where sharp prosodic differences exist between different realisations of the same text, these can often be traced back to semantic underspecification, i.e. different legitimate possibilities to interpret parts of the text.

References

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