
Sentences with non-canonical word order – error-prone but useful after all?!

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Sentences with non-canonical word order have attracted much attention in research on language comprehension and production. Here, we concentrate on non-canonical variants of simple subject-before-object (SO) clauses in German: object-before-subject (OS) and passive clauses. Psycholinguistic research has led to conflicting results. A major finding in research on language comprehension has been that sentences with non-canonical word order are error-prone when comprehension is assessed by means of tasks that require participants to retrieve specific pieces of information from a prior sentence (e.g., agent-patient naming, Ferreira 2003; Meng & Bader 2021; wh-questions, Bader & Meng 2023). With tasks that probe comprehension in a more global way (e.g., yes-no questions, Gibson et al. 2013; plausibility judgments, Meng & Bader 2021), in contrast, fewer or no errors at all are observed for non-canonical sentences.

With regard to language production, corpus and experimental research has revealed that SO clauses are produced with much higher frequency than OS and passive clauses, in line with the finding that the latter two clause structures cause higher error rates with certain comprehension tasks. In some cases, however, sentences with non-canonical order are as frequent as or even more frequent than corresponding SO sentences, as we will show with new data from corpus and experimental studies. For example, OS sentences are highly preferred when the object is discourse given and realized by a demonstrative pronoun or when the object relates to the prior discourse via a POSET relation (e.g., part-whole).

We will discuss what these different insights into the comprehension and production of non-canonical sentences mean for the question of whether non-canonical sentences should be used at all and, if so, under what circumstances.

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