

The Function of Accented Pronouns

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The existence of accented pronouns is intriguing since speakers tend to accent information that is new in the discourse, while pronouns, by their very essence, typically refer to entities that are given. This raises the question, under what conditions do speakers employ these referring expressions? Since the motivations for this phenomenon are not always clear, current hypotheses have been unable to uniformly predict their felicitous occurrence.

In approaching this question, Kameyama (1997) relies on an implicature analysis whereby an accented pronoun constitutes a marked form which, in turn, competes with the unmarked form via Gricean principles. Such theories posit that accented pronouns should only be found in referentially ambiguous contexts, since accent would mean reference to a less accessible option among more than one possibility. This idea is further formalized by Beaver (2004).

In what can be characterized as a different class of theories, Schwarzschild (1999) posits that accent marking is a direct result of focus marking. A very influential theory which, in many ways, straddles these two positions is that of Rooth (2019) who argues that a speaker uses accent to evoke alternatives. The importance of contrast in understanding pronoun interpretation was, of course, previously argued by the likes of De Hoop (2004) and Kehler (2005). Furthermore, these works are largely based on constructed examples rather than evidence from the field, highlighting the need for empirical analyses involving naturally occurring data.

I address these questions using data sources from the Blog Authorship Corpus, in which we treat orthographic emphasis, in the form of enclosing asterisks, as a proxy for accentuation. 443 cases of orthographically marked pronouns were collected and each analyzed on a number of metrics salient in previous, competing theories. These features included whether or not the token was an instance of felicitous accenting, what the preferred referent of the accented pronoun in question was, and whether or not there was ambiguity in terms of other possible referents which agreed in gender, number, and person. Each entry was also marked for the grammatical role of the pronoun, whether accenting was required or optional, and whether or not there was contrast evoked. Annotations also included a “replacement test” whereby the pronoun was replaced with its antecedent form to see if that form would still bear the same prosodic accent.

It is our expectation that the data will support a theory where accenting is licensed by information structural constraints and coherence relations, as suggested by Kehler et al. (2008), among others. Under such an analysis, the decision to accent and the decision to pronominalize are totally independent from one another.

The findings challenge several established theoretical approaches, though there are particular cases which may be in harmony with each of said analyses. Particularly, close to three fourths of accented pronouns in the data occur in categorically unambiguous contexts, contradicting those theories, such as that of Kameyama (1997), which posit that, if a pronoun is stressed, there must be a referential ambiguity and that the accent shifts the referent to something other than what it would have otherwise been. These cases, of course, included the entirety of those with first-person pronouns. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of cases did involve some sort of explicit or implicit contrast. This was also disproportionately more frequent among first-person pronouns. Finally, more than half of collected instances still bore the same prosody when replaced with their antecedent, indicating that accented pronouns are, in fact, pronouns which happen to be accented, the same way other nominals might be accented.

In addition to further problematizing previous hypotheses, we anticipate that further analysis will yield a unifying account that will capture all of the data collected. The outcome of this inquiry will also serve as evidence of the validity of relying on written markers as a proxy for prosodic accenting.

References

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