Syntactic and information-structural influences on coercion
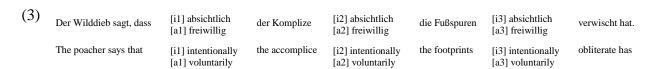
Coercion is generally defined as a repair mechanism to solve compositional conflicts, especially semantic mismatches (e.g., de Swart 2011). Some authors argue that this adaptive operation may be triggered by conceptual conflicts (Dölling 2005, Buscher 2013) and syntax or information-structure (Buscher 2013). These factors have not been investigated psycholinguistically yet. In four experiments, we investigated German mental attitude adverbials (MAAs) like *absichtlich* 'intentionally', which reveal that syntactic and information-structural factors can trigger coercion.

MAAs ascribe the attitude of the highest argument of the event, cf. the hiker in (1) (Frey 2003). An inanimate object as the anchor argument violates the selectional restrictions of the MAA, therefore a compositional integration fails. Based on descriptive and reading time data, Buscher (2011, 2013) shows that intentional MAAs (iMAAs, cf. *absichtlich*) allow for solving this compositional conflict via coercion by inferring an appropriate attitude holder; this inference is unavailable for assimilative MAAs (aMAAs, cf. *freiwillig*) (cf. (2)).

(1)   Der Wanderer liegt absichtlich/freiwillig im Schatten.
        'The hiker lies intentionally/voluntarily in the shadow.'

(2)   Die Picknickdecke liegt absichtlich/*freiwillig im Schatten.
        'The picnic blanket lies intentionally/*voluntarily in the shadow.'

Based on Frey (2003), we examine whether syntactic factors trigger coercion. He argues that the syntactic base position of MAAs is below the highest argument; only this configuration allows for ascribing the attitude to the compositionally designated anchor argument.

In our experiments, we contrasted iMAAs with aMAAs and manipulated adverb position (cf. (3)): MAA precedes [i1|a1] the subject, [i2|a2] the object, or [i3|a3] the verb.

(3)

Der Wilddieb sagt, dass	[i1] absichtlich [a1] freiwillig	der Komplize	[i2] absichtlich [a2] freiwillig	die Fußspuren	[i3] absichtlich [a3] freiwillig	verwischt hat.
The poacher says that	[i1] intentionally [a1] voluntarily	the accomplice	[i2] intentionally [a2] voluntarily	the footprints	[i3] intentionally [a3] voluntarily	obliterate has

In contrast to conditions [i2|a2]/[i3|a3], conditions [i1|a1] don't realize the configuration required for the compositional identification of the attitude holder, as the highest argument is in the scope of the MAA. If [i1], in contrast to [a1], triggers coercion, [i1] should be more acceptable than [a1] and the embedded subject should less likely be interpreted as the attitude holder. Conditions [i2|a2]/[i3|a3] should show no reduced acceptability and the embedded subject should usually be the attitude holder.

In our first study, 48 participants rated the acceptability of 36 items and indicated which person they ascribe the attitude to by selecting among four options: matrix subject, embedded subject, embedded object, or an unmentioned entity. The analysis of relative frequencies of chosen subordinated subjects confirmed the central prediction: iMAAs in pre-subject position reduced the choices of embedded subjects compared to iMAAs in pre-object or pre-verb position, 79% vs. 88%; no decrease occurred with aMMAs, 96% vs. 97%. Acceptability judgments partly supported the predictions (e.g., [a1] less acceptable than [i1]). We will also

report on follow-up studies that reveal (i) that the deviances observed in this first study can be explained by independent factors, like definiteness, and (ii) that factors like focus may influence coercion, too.

References

Buscher, F. (2011). *Uminterpretation bei Einstellungsadverbialen: Experimentelle Evidenz.* Vortrag beim 11. Ereignissemantik-Workshop, Universität Flensburg, 09.-10.12.2011.

Buscher, F. (2013). Im Spannungsfeld von Semantik und Pragmatik: Zur Bedeutungskonstitution von Einstellungsadverbialen. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 32(2), 135-179.

Dölling, J. (2005). Semantische Form und pragmatische Anreicherung: Situationsausdrücke in der Äußerungsinterpretation. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 24, 159-225.

Frey, W. (2003). Syntactic Conditions on Adjunct Classes. In E. Lang, C. Maienborn & C. Fabricius-Hansen (eds.), *Modifying Adjuncts*. (Interface Explorations 4). Berlin: de Gruyter, 163-209.

Swart, H. de (2011). Mismatches and coercion. In C. Maienborn, K. v. Heusinger & P. Portner (eds.), *Semantics. An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*, Volume 1. Berlin: de Gruyter, 574-597.