

Being Nice is Hard: Underspecification and Coercion in Copula Sentences

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Theoretical Background

Coercion

contextually driven resolution of a combinatory conflict, additional, complex compositional operations → processing costs!

Underspecification

contextually driven specification of an underspecified, compositionally well-formed semantic representation → no processing costs!

Agentivity and the Copula

- *Sophie is friendly / pale.* → property, stative *be*
- *Sophie is being friendly / *pale.* → control of action, agentive *be*
- *Sophie ist freundlich / (*)bläss.* → stative or agentive *be*

Is the Copula Stative or Underspecified?

Coercion Account *Be* is stative

→ combination with stative material is **easy**, combination with agentive material requires **coercion**

Underspecification Account *Be* is underspecified

→ combination with stative and agentive material is **easy**

Methods

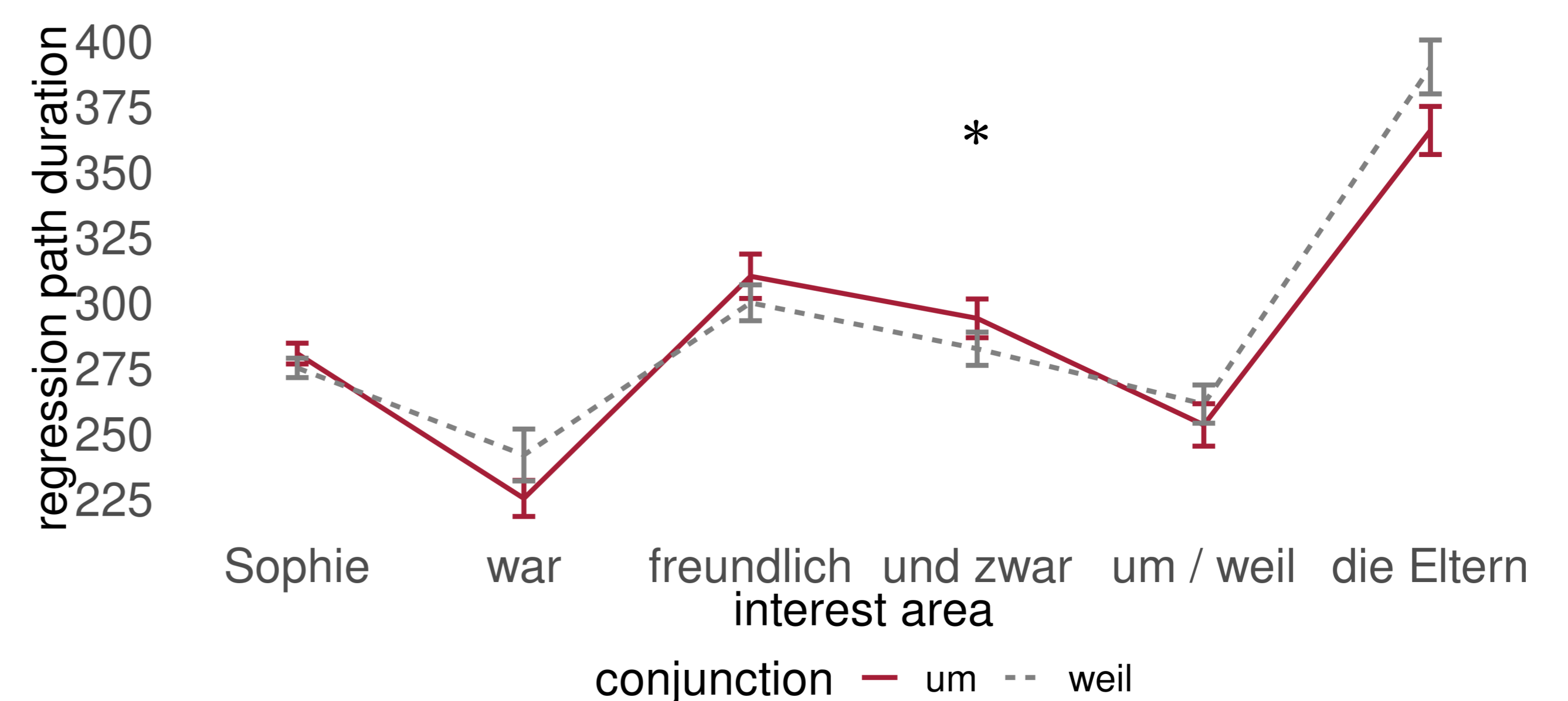
Eye-tracking during reading, 60 items, 40 participants, mixed model analysis 1st pass RT, 1st fixation duration, regr. path duration, regr. out

Experiment 1

Is the copula stative or underspecified?

IA 1	IA 2	IA 3	IA 4	IA 5	IA 6	IA 7
Sophie war	freundlich,	und zwar	um _{agentive}	die Eltern	...	
Sophie was	friendly	and namely	to	the parents	...	
Sophie war	freundlich,	und zwar	weil _{neutral}	die Eltern	...	
Sophie was	friendly	and namely	because	the parents	...	

Regression path duration: war + um_{agentive} > war + weil_{neutral}
→ **Coercion Account**

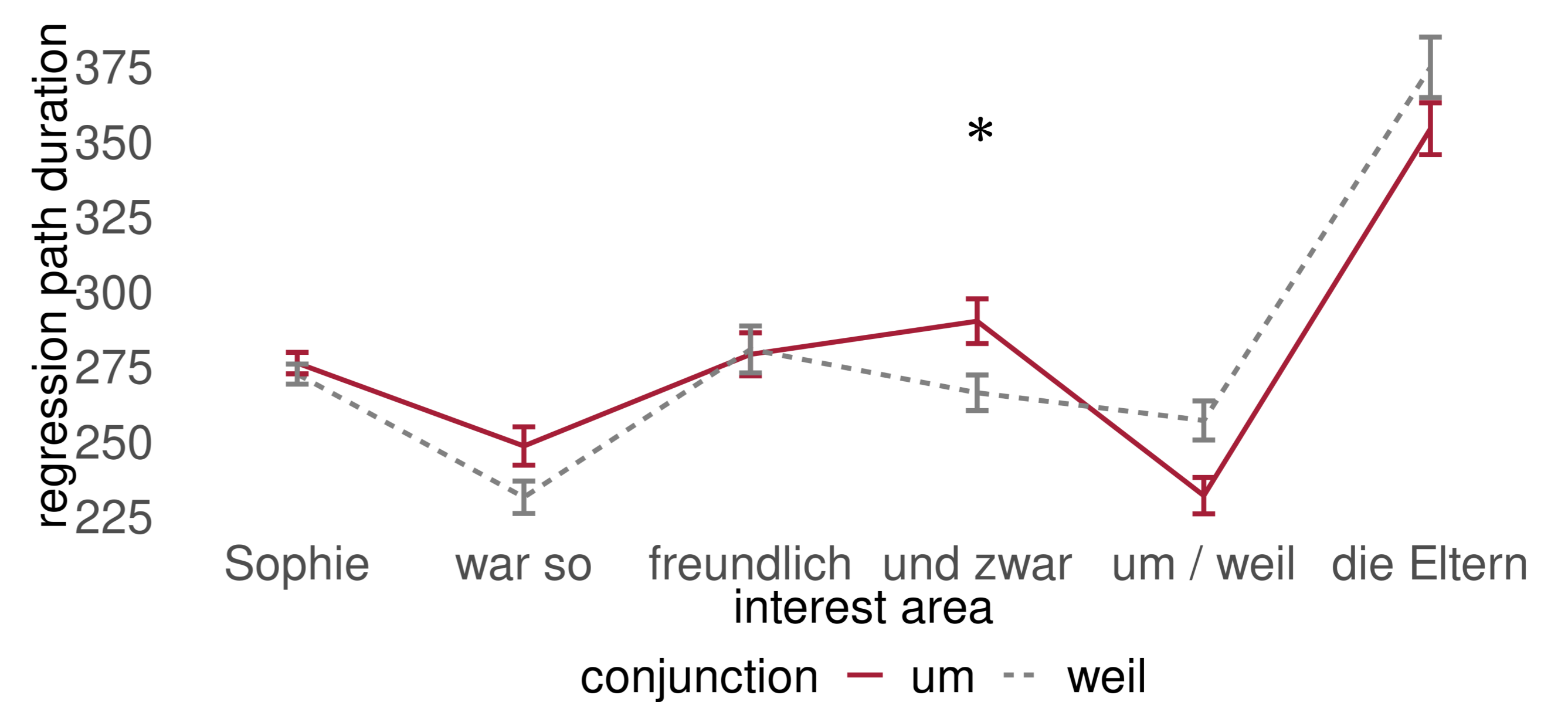


Experiment 2

Does bringing the focus to the predicate by “so” change the outcome?

IA 1	IA 2	IA 3	IA 4	IA 5	IA 6	IA 7
Sophie war so	freundlich,	und zwar	um / weil	die Eltern	...	
Sophie was so	friendly	and namely	to / because	the parents	...	

Regression path duration: war so + um_{agentive} > war so + weil_{neutral}
→ **Coercion Account**

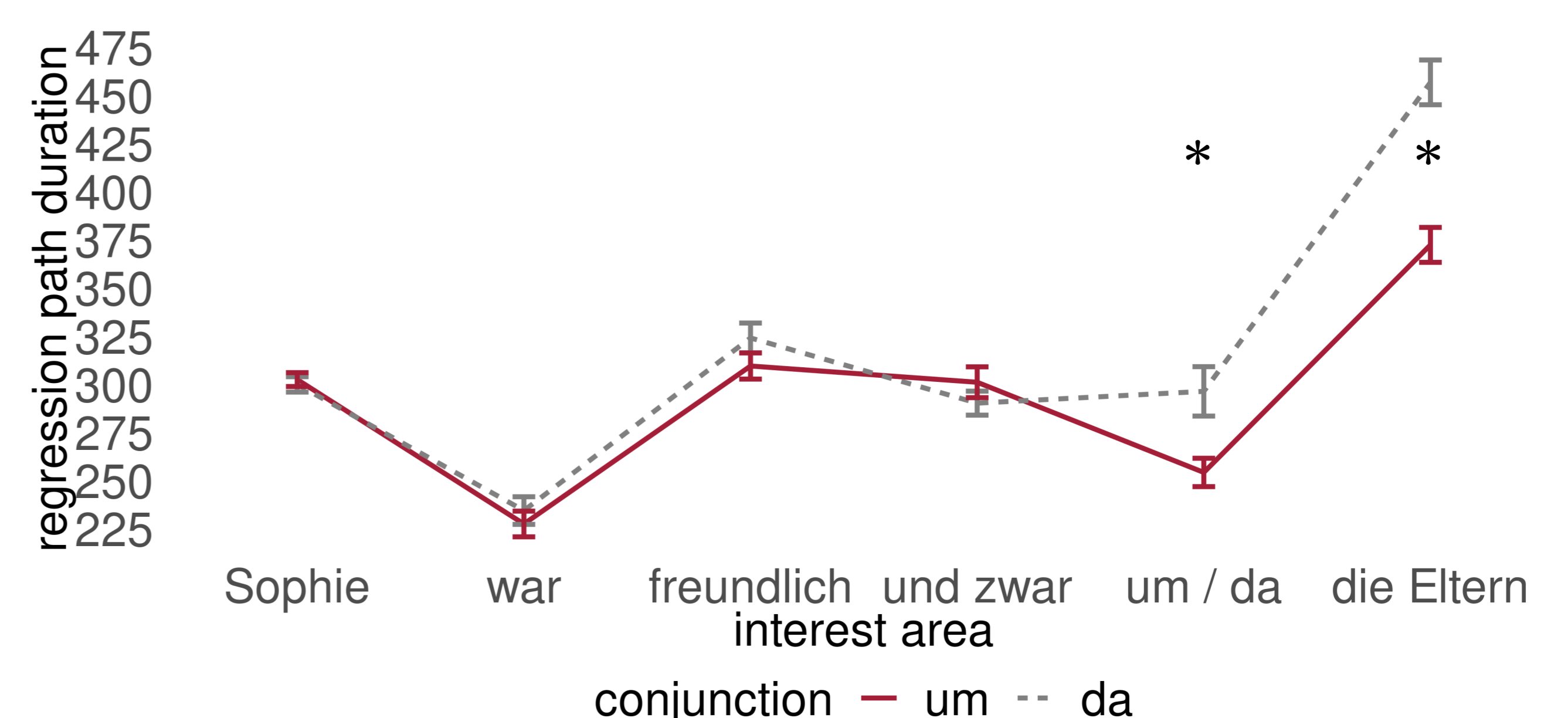


Experiment 3

Does the effect persist in other neutral conjunctions?

IA 1	IA 2	IA 3	IA 4	IA 5	IA 6	IA 7
Sophie war	freundlich,	und zwar	um / da	die Eltern	...	
Sophie was	friendly	and namely	to / because	the parents	...	

Most measures: war + um_{agentive} < war + da_{neutral}
→ **da is too unexpected**



Conclusions

Be is lexically stative. An agentive interpretation requires costly coercion. Bringing focus to the predicate doesn't change the outcome.