

## Being nice is hard: Underspecification and Coercion in Copula Sentences

The difference between (1a) and (1b) has been subject to much debate. (1a) describes Sophie's characteristic; (1b) carries an element of Sophie's control over her behavior, i.e. agentivity (Partee, 1977; Carlson, 1977). Some see the agentive interpretation as the result of an optimal coercion (Maienborn, 2003). Others argue that the copula is underspecified relative to the situation argument it can take; the agentive interpretation arises through composition (Rothstein, 1999). The German copula has the same surface form for both stative and agentive interpretations. We present two studies that investigate the semantics of the German copula.

(1) (a) Sophie is friendly. (b) Sophie is being friendly.

(2) (a) Sophie | {war, verhielt sich} | freundlich, | und zwar | um  
Sophie {was, behaved herself} friendly and namely in.order.to  
| die Eltern | stolz auf sie zu machen.  
the parents proud of her to make

(b) Sophie | {war, verhielt sich} | freundlich, | und zwar | weil |  
Sophie {was, behaved herself} friendly and namely because  
die Eltern | sie gut erzogen haben.  
the parents her well raised have

**Experiment 1** investigated whether the agentive interpretation of copula predicate constructions involves a semantic re-interpretation of the copula. The eye-tracking during reading study had a  $2 \times 2$  design: verb (*sein* copula, *sich verhalten* 'to behave'), conjunction (agentive *um-zu*, neutral *weil*). *Sich verhalten* was used as a control. 40 participants were tested in 4 lists with 60 items; see (2), | indicate invisible IAs. Critical IAs were the conjunction *weillum-zu*, one IA preceding and one following it. The results confirm that the agentive interpretation requires coercion: copula+*um* was more difficult than copula+*weil*. This was visible through interactions in: 1<sup>st</sup> fixation duration ( $\beta=0.14$ ,  $SE=0$ ,  $t=3.8$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), 1<sup>st</sup> pass RT ( $\beta=0.41$ ,  $SE=0.1$ ,  $t=3.95$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and regression path duration ( $\beta=0.4$ ,  $SE=0.1$ ,  $t=4$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) on the conjunction.

**Experiment 2** investigated whether agentive coercion is easier when the adjective is modified by the particle *so*. *So* introduces evaluation or focus, possibly facilitating agentive coercion (Wiese, 2011). Methods, analysis, and materials were as in Exp. 1, with one crucial modification: in copula sentences, the adjective was preceded by *so*. In regressions out of IA *und zwar*, copula+*um* elicited more regressions than copula+*weil* ( $\beta=1.1$ ,  $SE=0.5$ ,  $t=2.2$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This effect was weaker than in Exp. 1 and present in only one measure. Otherwise, the participants favoured the agentive conjunction over the neutral one. The addition of *so* facilitates the agentive re-interpretation of the stative VP in combination with the conjunction *um*.

**In sum**, Experiments 1 and 2 found evidence of the copula's lexical stativity. The agentive interpretation requires a cognitively costly process of coercion, but the addition of *so* facilitates re-interpretation.

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