

Shirts, scarves, or socks

Remembering focus alternatives in Vietnamese

Introduction

Intuitively, in tonal languages, such as Vietnamese, one would expect intonation to play only a small role in expressing communicative functions. However, experimental studies which investigate the use of intonation and focus reject this generic claim [1, 2, 3]. Moreover, prosodic focus marking was examined in the Northern Vietnamese dialect [3]. In our study, we investigate the following question:

Does contrastive intonation improve later recall for focus alternatives in (Northern) Vietnamese?

Focus alternatives

In the last sentence of (1), the emphasis on the object *socks* indicates that Huy did not find *shirts* or *scarves*. The elements which could be used with the focused constituent in an “either X or Y”-construction are ‘focus alternatives’.

- (1) Huy đang tìm áo, khăn và tất.
Huy was looking for her shirts, scarves, and socks.
Anh ấy rất không gọn gàng.
He was very untidy.
Anh ấy tìm thấy TẤT dưới gầm giường.
He found the SOCKS under the bed.

Recall

- Focus improves memory for alternatives [4].
- Contrastive intonation improves the recognition of alternatives in memory tasks [5].
- Because focus signals the importance of alternatives for the interpretation of an utterance [6], it makes these alternatives more salient.

Method

- Replication of a study with German speakers [4].
- The items were translated and adapted to Vietnamese as well as balanced for number of morphemes (i.e, one vs. two) and tones (i.e, 3 high tones vs. 3 low tones).
- Procedure:
 - Participants listened to short stories, as in (1).
 - The last word in the story (here: ‘socks’) was either expressed with a contrastive focus (L+H*) or a broad intonation contour (H*).
 - After 10 stories, participants had to perform a **delayed recall task** in which they recalled the elements in the context sentences.

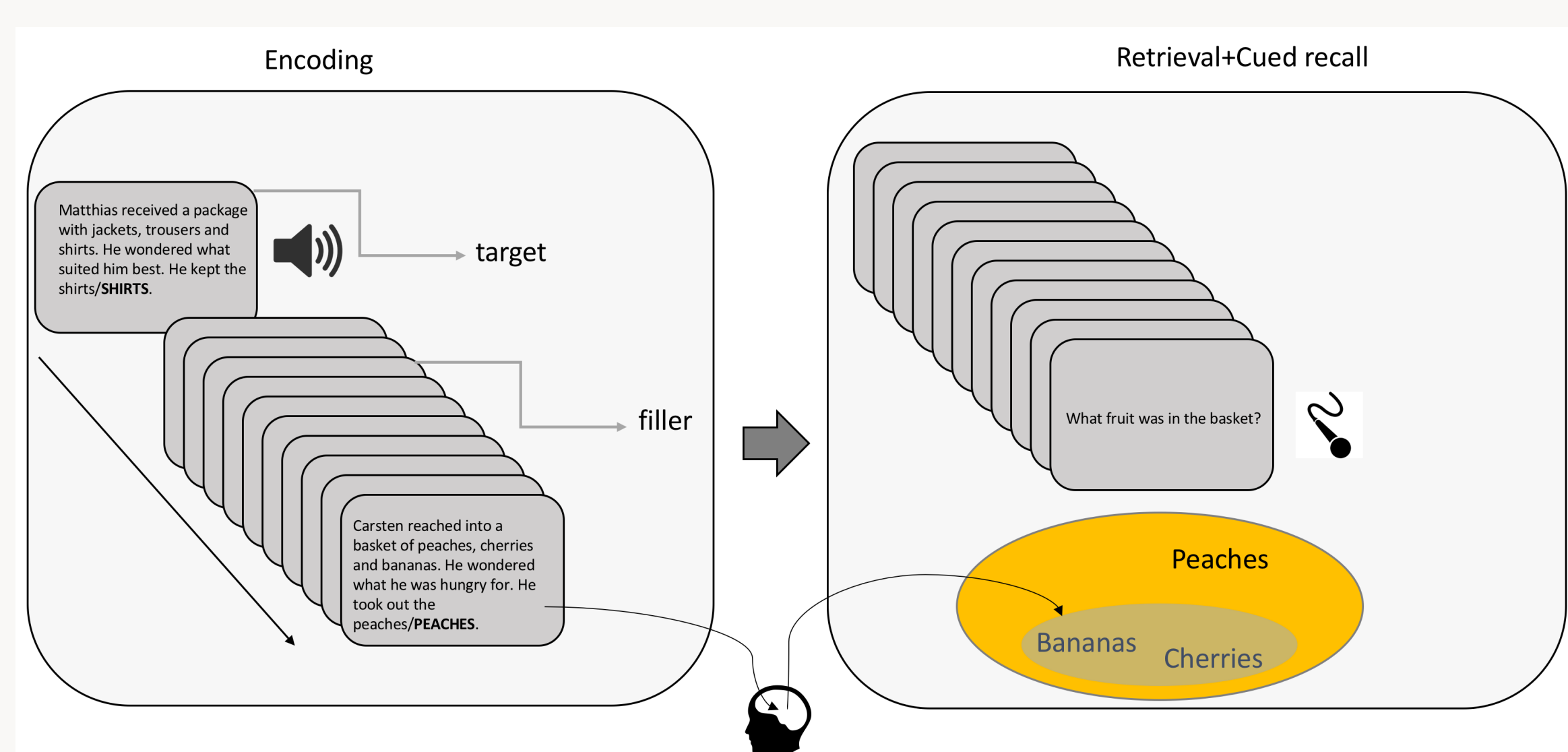


Figure: Delayed recall task.

Participants:

- 42 native Vietnamese speakers of the Northern dialect (36 female, mean age = 24.3):
 - They grew up in Northern Vietnam (until at least age 15) and now live in Berlin, Germany (mean years = 2.8).

Results

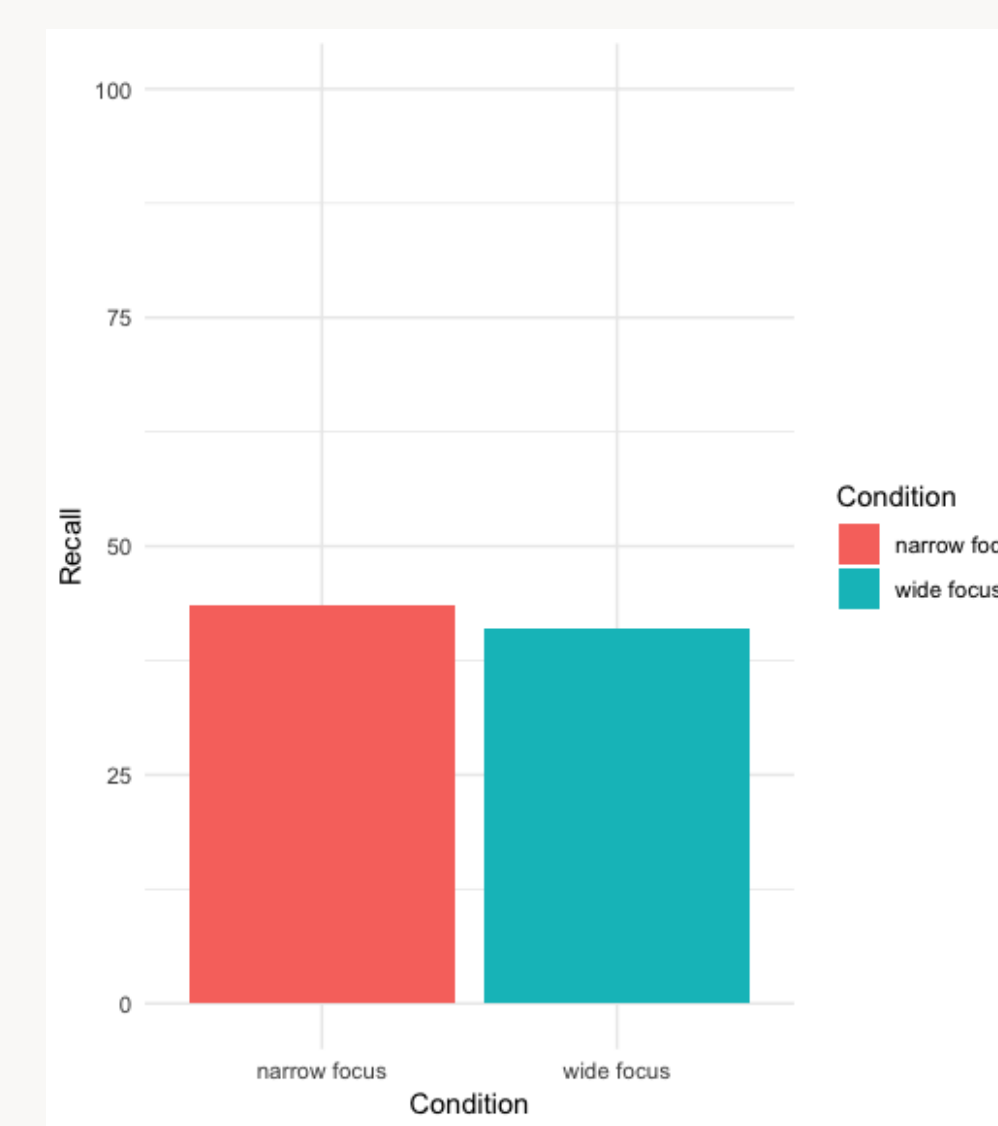


Figure: Alternative recall.

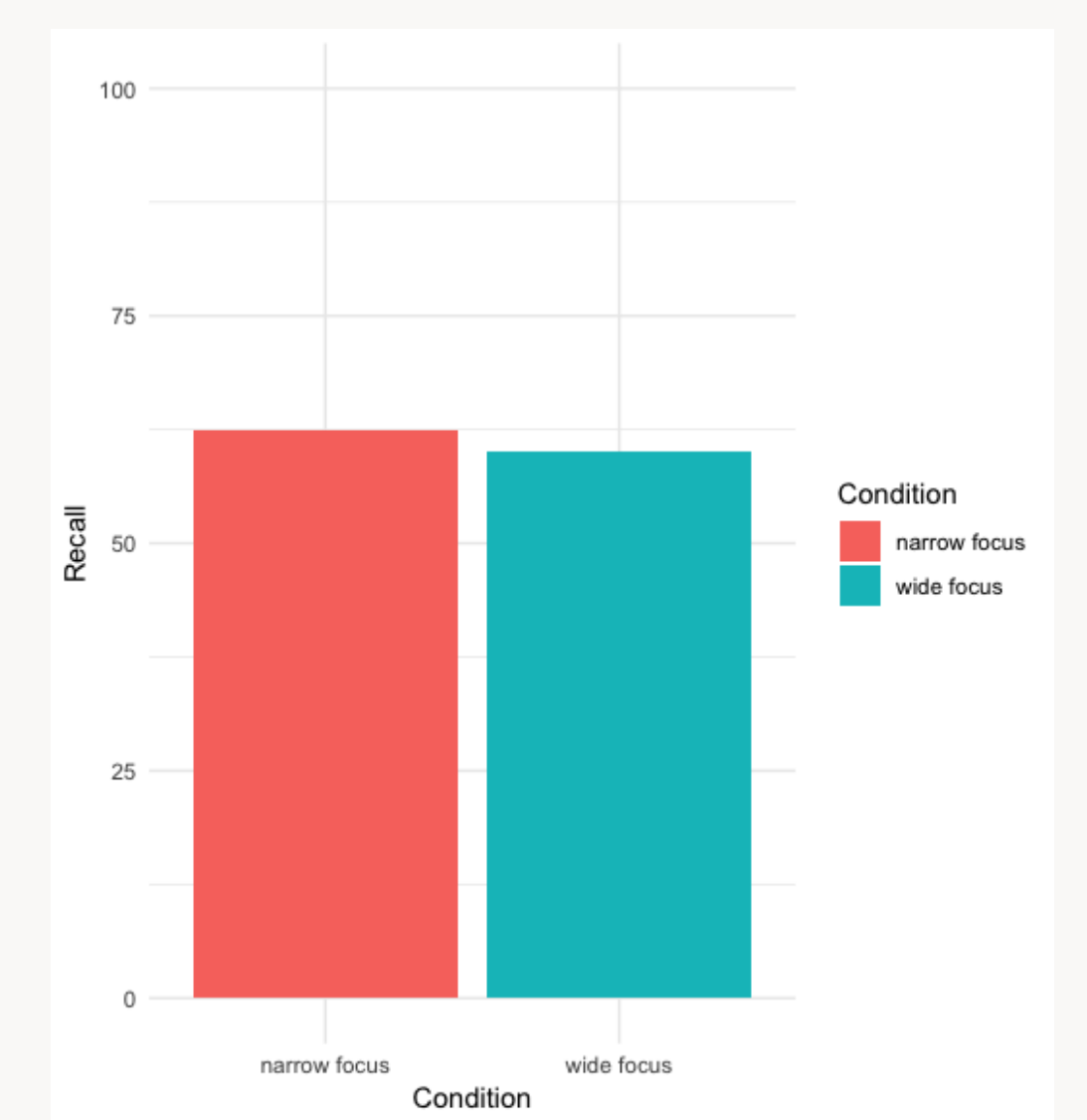


Figure: Focused element recall.

- The recall of alternatives for a focused element is better if the focused element is marked by contrastive focus: 43.55% recall of alternatives for contrastively focused items vs. 40.92% recall of alternatives for wide focus ($p = .047$, paired t-test).
 - Focused elements were remembered better overall (62.5% vs. 60.1%) but the difference was not significant ($p = .1$).
- Please note that we are still in the data acquisition phase. The present results are therefore preliminary.

Conclusion

- Contrastive intonation seems to improve later recall for focus alternatives in Vietnamese, similar to German.
- Replication of the results from the German speakers [4].
- Our results are additional evidence for the assumption that focus marking makes alternatives more salient.

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