

Focus restrictions in specificational clauses are language-specific

Experimental evidence from Russian

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Highlights

FIELD Research in experimental syntax: an auditory acceptability judgement study, Likert 1–7

SUBJECT A distinction between two types of copular clauses is thought to be universal: in one type of clauses focus position is restricted

IDEA This restriction is indeed language-specific but there is still asymmetry that needs explanation

OUTPUT The asymmetry interpreted in terms of syntactic features is the solution to motivating structural differences between the two types of copular clauses

Methods

2 auditory acceptability judgment experiments with 2*2*2 design (different positions of pause)

- TYPE OF COPULAR CLAUSE (SPECIFICATIONAL/PREDICATIONAL)
- FOCUS POSITION (DP1/DP2)
- AGREEMENT PATTERN (DP1/DP2)

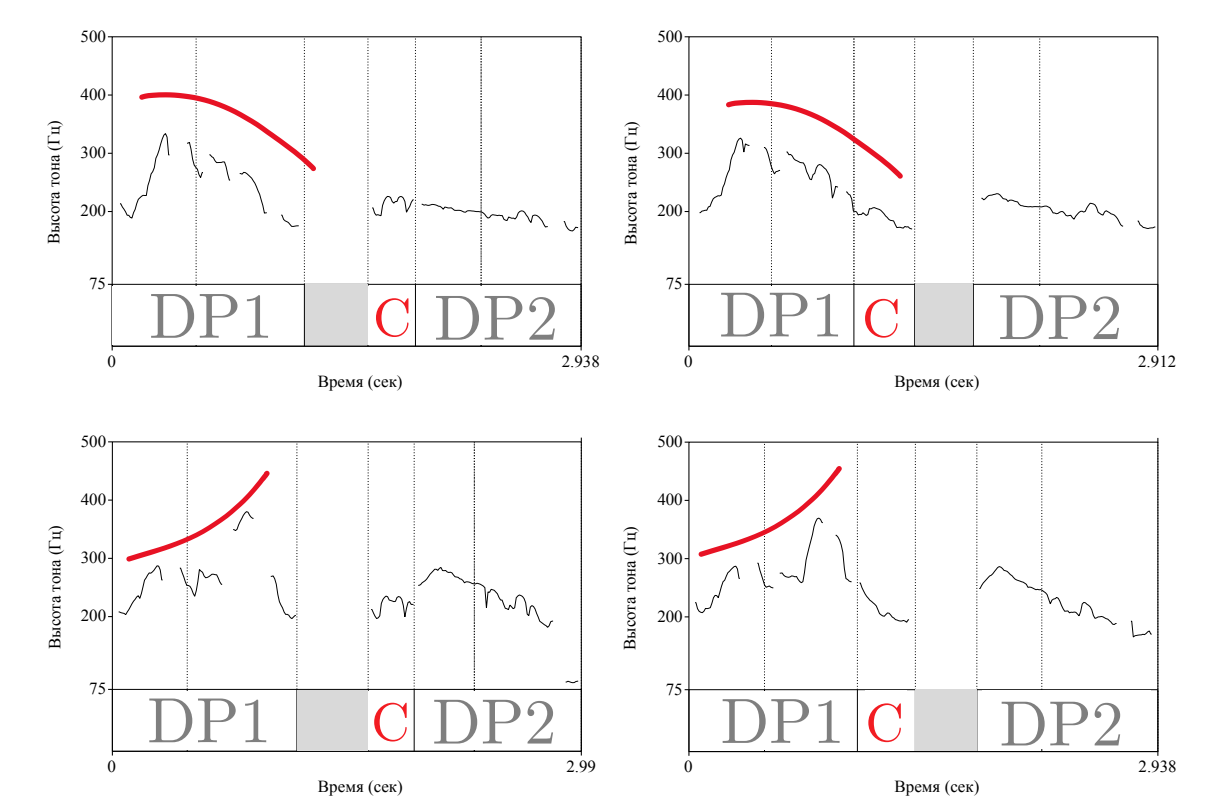
focus marking licensed by a question fillers (gram + ungram)

Likert scale from 1 to 7

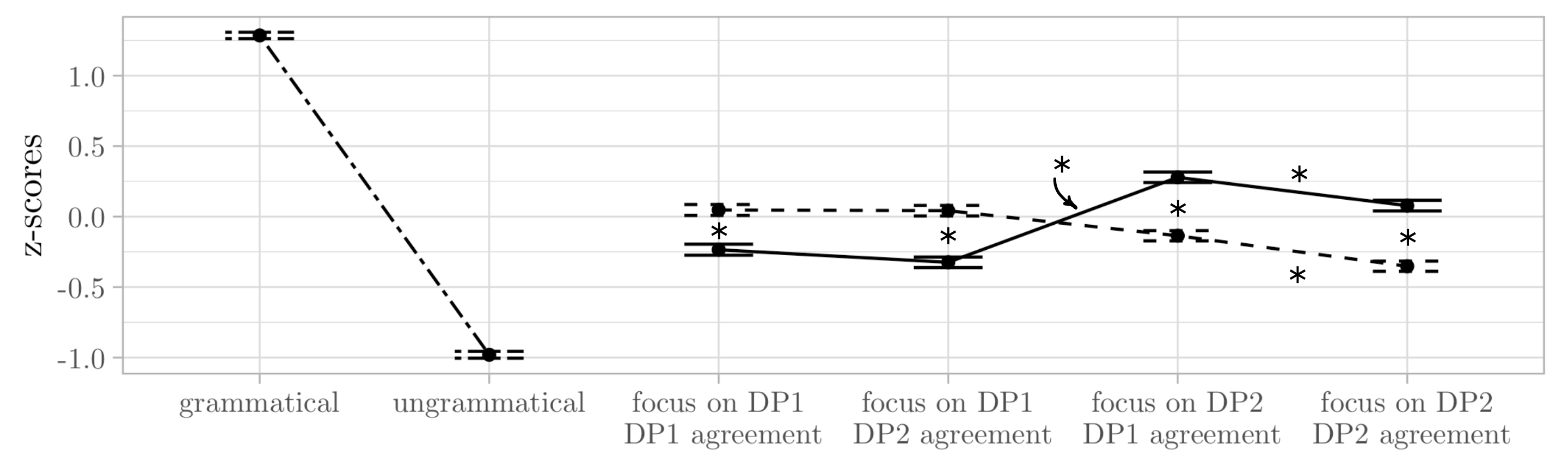
100 participants (w/o outliers)

43 F, 57 M

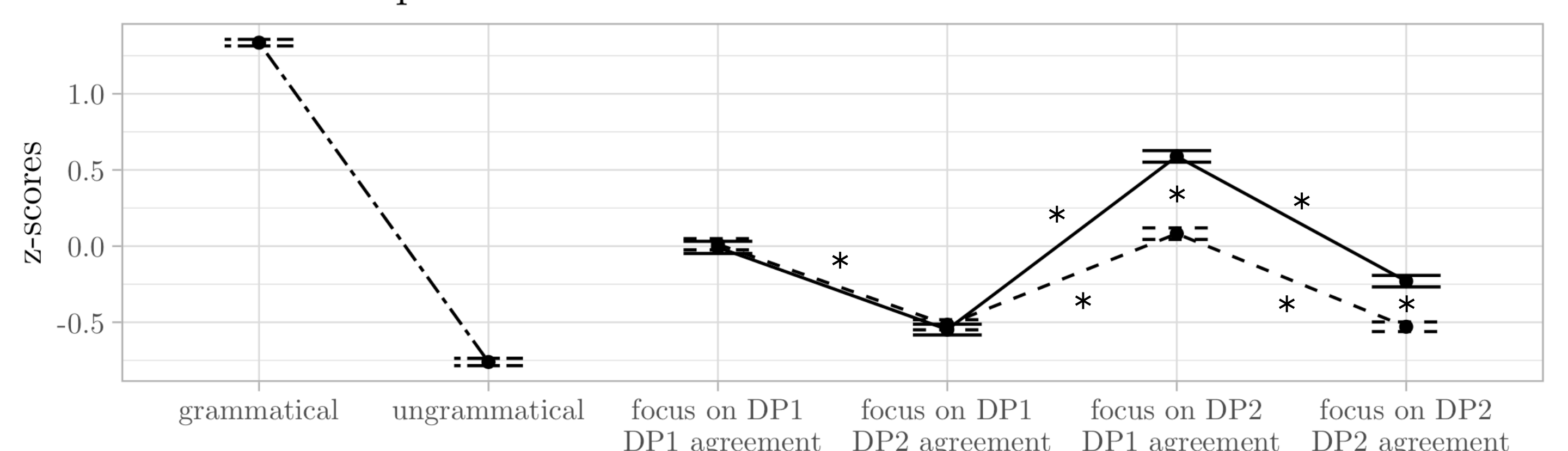
$\mu_{age} = 43$, $SD_{age} = 12$, [18; 72]



Pause before copula



Pause after copula



Copular clause type --- filler — specificational -- predicational

Specificational copular clauses (SCCs)

non-referential DP1_{NOM} copula referential DP2_{NOM}

- (1) a. The winner is Sarah.¹
b. The culprit was John.²

fixed information structure: DP2 in focus³⁻⁴

- (2) A: Who was the culprit? (John or Bill?)
B: The culprit was JOHN.
A: What was John? (the culprit or the victim?)
B: *The CULPRIT was John / him.
vs. [predicational] B: John / he was the CULPRIT.³

RESEARCH QUESTION: are the restrictions on focus position universal?

Hypothesis

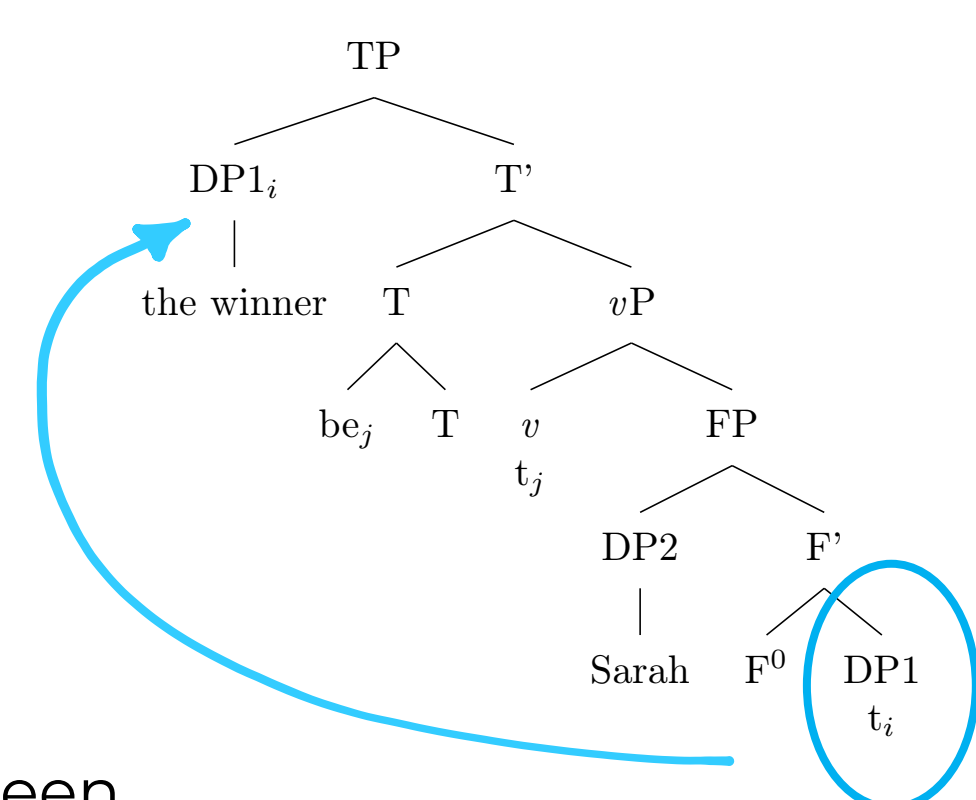
THEORETICAL MODEL:

SCCs are inverted small clauses with a left-dislocated non-referential DP1

In Germanic:

obligatory thematization when fronting⁴⁻⁶
→ focus on DP1

- (3) a. A DULL COOL SUMMER it had been ...
b. Now, THOSE THINGS I would have to give away, ...



In Russian:
different information structure
thematization when fronting is not obligatory

- (4) a. A: What did the boy buy yesterday?
B: ŠOKOLADKI ↘ malčik kupil.
The chocolates the boy bought.
b. A: Where do the chocolates come from?
B: šokoladki ↗ MALČIK ↘ kupil.
The chocolates the boy bought.

Results

Focus on both DP1 and DP2 in SCCs is moderately acceptable.

No expected difference between specificational and predicational clauses.
→ Acceptability of focus in SCCs depends on language-specific information structure constraints.

Focus on a referential DP2 in SCCs is most acceptable.

→ Asymmetry is still present! Cf. variable/value, hyperonym/hyponym

Solution: attributive use of DP1 (description of a general property)⁷

- (5) Smith's murderer is insane.
= 'whoever killed Smith must have been insane'

DP1 in SCCs⁸: abstract (reason, goal, cause), roles (winner, candidate)

No analysis of SCCs provides clear motivation for inversion
→ Feature [+attr] on D as a motivation for inversion

Desired proof: any other asymmetries connected to attributive status?

