Online processing of contrastive focus and topic constituents

The current talk is concerned with the online processing of contrastive and non-contrastive focus and topic constituents. Semantically, contrastive focus and topic constituents are analyzed via alternative sets (contrastive associates that could replace the contrastive constituent, e.g., Rooth 1995). We tested whether such contrastive associates become immediately salient upon hearing isolated utterances with contrastive accents. To this end, we conducted three visual world eye-tracking experiments in which participants heard utterances in different intonation contours and clicked on the word that matched the grammatical object in the utterance. We monitored fixations to words that contrasted with the grammatical subject (contrastive associate) and to words that were non-contrastively related to it (non-contrastive associate). Results showed that listeners directed more fixations to contrastive associates when the subject was produced with a contrastive accent (contrastive focus or contrastive topic) but not with a non-contrastive accent (non-contrastive focus or non-contrastive topic). This suggests that contrastive associates only become salient in contrastive accents. No difference in fixations was found in fixations to non-contrastive associates (e.g., sports) across conditions, making a priming mechanism unlikely.