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Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure Vol. 3

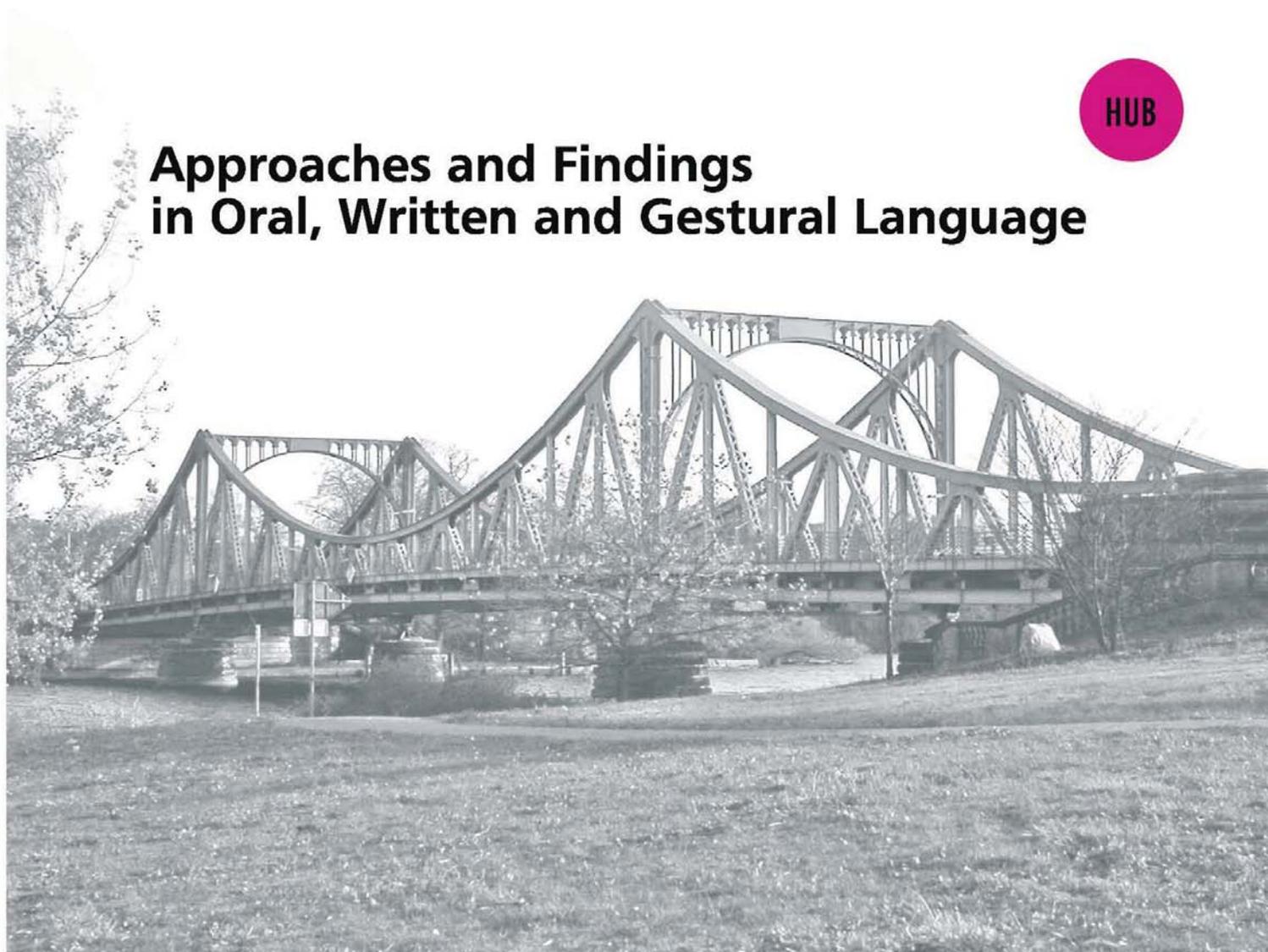
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Approaches and Findings in Oral, Written and Gestural Language

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Preface

This third volume of the working papers series *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure* illustrates the diversity of approaches in play at the SFB 632 “Information Structure” (www.sfb632.uni-potsdam.de). The seven papers included offer a wide spectrum of new research findings and ongoing debates concerning focus and other information structural phenomena. Four of the papers are based on presentations at the third internal SFB workshop in Gülpe in October 2004. Contributing to this volume are members of every thematic group at the SFB, i.e. a theory developing project, typologically and diachronically oriented projects, psycholinguistic projects, and a phonetic database project.

The first paper in this volume by Elke Kasimir (Project A4: “Focus Evaluation, Anaphoricity, Discourse Coherence”) discusses the reliability of the commonly used question-answer test as a focus diagnostic tool. The complications assumed by Kasimir in considering a category of *givenness* and her proposed alternative account are challenged and discussed in the following paper by Thomas Weskott (Project C1: “Contextually Licensed Non-canonical Word Order in Language Comprehension”). In the third paper, Paul Elbourne, also from the A4 project, looks at four phenomena that are particularly troublesome for theories of ellipsis and offers a new semantic analysis.

While these papers treat their subjects on the basis of English examples, the data of the fourth contribution by Ines Fiedler and Anne Schwarz (Project B1: “Focus in Gur and Kwa Languages”) come from five Ghanaian languages of the Gur and Kwa language group. These languages have some morphosyntactically heavily marked focus constructions which are analyzed and diachronically interpreted. Taking a diachronic approach as well, Roland Hinterhölzl, Svetlana Petrova and Michael Solf (Project B4: “The Role of Information Structure in the Development of Word Order Regularities in Germanic”) examine the interaction between information structure and word order in Old High German based on data from the Tatian translation (9th century) and find support that the finite verb form in Early Germanic distinguishes the information-structural domains of Topic and Focus.

Anke Sennema, Ruben van de Vijver, Susanne E. Carroll, and Anne Zimmer-Stahl (Project C4: “Prosody and Information Structure as Forms of Input in Second Language Acquisition”) consider the effect of focus accent, word length

and position for native and nonnative perceptual processing of semantic information, as investigated experimentally. The last paper by Stefanie Jannedy and Norma Mendoza-Denton (Project D3: “Signal Parameters Connected to Prominence and Phrasing within Spoken Utterances in Different Languages”) departs from classical phonetics to explore how gesture and intonation interact to structure and align information in spoken discourse, specifically through a co-occurrence of pitch accents and gestural apices.

This new volume of the series ISIS reflects the broad range of the SFB’s research interests and we hope that it incites further studies in information structural phenomena in language in all its manifestations.

Shinichiro Ishihara
Michaela Schmitz
Anne Schwarz

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Question-answer test and givenness: some question marks

Elke Kasimir

University of Potsdam

In order to investigate the empirical properties of focus, it is necessary to diagnose focus (or: “what is focused”) in particular linguistic examples. It is often taken for granted that the application of one single diagnostic tool, the so-called *question-answer test*, which roughly says that whatever a question asks for is focused in the answer, is a fool-proof test for focus. This paper investigates one example class where such uncritical belief in the question-answer test has led to the assumption of rather complex focus projection rules: in these examples, pitch accent placement has been claimed to depend on certain parts of the focused constituents being *given* or not. It is demonstrated that such focus projection rules are unnecessarily complex and in turn require the assumption of unnecessarily complicated meaning rules, not to speak of the difficulties to give a precise semantic/pragmatic definition of the allegedly involved *givenness* property. For the sake of the argument, an alternative analysis is put forward which relies solely on alternative sets following Mats Rooth's work, and avoids any recourse to *givenness*. As it turns out, this alternative analysis is not only simpler but also makes in a critical case the better predictions.

Keywords: Focus, Givenness

1 Focus diagnostics

In order to investigate the empirical properties of focus, it is necessary to diagnose focus (or: “what is focused”) in particular linguistic examples. This concerns typological study and corpus annotation, but also any attempt to understand focus from a theoretical point of view. In the following, I assume, following Jackendoff (1972), that focus corresponds to a syntactic feature, say