

When Do Nouns Control Sentence Stress Placement?

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Abstract

The relation between sentence stress and grammatical category is not a new problem, but largely ignored in recent research, in which such related topics as given/new information, focus and its scope and sentence stress have often been misdirected and misconstrued. Sentence stress placement has traditionally been described in terms of two conditions: (i) the stress must fall on a contextually new lexeme; (ii) it must fall as far towards the end of the utterance as possible. The main claim of the present paper is that in **neutral intonation**, the place of the “neutral” stress, as contrasted with the “emphatic”/“contrastive”/“corrective” stress, is controlled by the contextual information value of the noun. The analysis of simple transitive sentences in English, German and Polish, each with a different syntactic structure, allows for the following, specific claims: (a) sentence stress must fall on the contextually “new” noun if such is present; (b) sentence stress must **not** fall on a contextually “given” noun; (a) and (b) lead to the conclusion that other grammatical categories, regardless of whether they are “new” or “given,” get the stress only in the absence of a “new” noun. It is also suggested that in some cases the prosodic parameters may be irrelevant in distinguishing “neutral” from “emphatic” stress.

Keywords: sentence stress placement, neutral intonation, end-focus principle, givenness, contextual information value of nouns, emphasis, contrastive/corrective interpretation.