Discourse Illusions in L1 and L2

Introduction: Several types of linguistic illusion, such as semantic and grammatical illusions, have become well-studied phenomena in psycholinguistics. These illusions have in common that they contain violations which are systematically overlooked. As yet, illusions at the discourse level have not been discussed in this context. The aim of the current contribution is to establish whether discourse violations, similar to semantic and grammatical violations, are also overlooked in a systematic manner; this would constitute a discourse illusion. An example of a discourse violation is given in (1a); a version without a violation given in (1b). The discourse marker “on the one hand...on the other hand” sets up an expectation of contrast [1]. In (1), arguments in favour of Laura going out have been presented with “on the one hand”. Contrasting arguments, i.e. arguments against Laura going out, should thus be presented with “on the other hand”. However, in (1a), a further argument in favour is presented instead. Using an acceptability judgment paradigm, we test the extent to which discourse violations like (1a) are overlooked. Furthermore, we test whether speakers are more susceptible to such illusions in their second language (L2) compared to their first language (L1). Previous studies [2; 3] have shown that L2 speakers have difficulty comprehending certain discourse connectives, and that this difficulty is influenced by proficiency and L1 transfer. It is possible, therefore, that L2 speakers are more susceptible to discourse illusions. Nevertheless, individual variation in the comprehension of certain discourse connectives has also been observed within L1 speakers [4]; this variation depends on reading experience. Materials: Items consist of 24 experimental items and 64 fillers. Two factors (Violation: incorrect; correct, and Language: German; English) are manipulated to create four conditions for each experimental item (see 1a-1d). Three types of discourse markers are tested (8 items each) covering three broad categories: contrast ("einerseits...andereseits", “on the one hand...on the other hand”); similarity (“auch”, “similarly”); denial of expectation (“trotzdem”, “however”). To establish whether the incorrect items behave similarly to other illusion types, a set of 16 bad fillers is included for comparison. The bad fillers are either contradictory items (n=12), see (2), or are incoherent text passages (n=4), see (3). The experiment consists of an English part (English items and fillers) and a German part (German items and fillers). The order of presentation of the two parts is alternated between participants. Participants: 251 students from a German university were tested. Language background, self-rated proficiency in English and German, and reading experience were measured. 225 participants listed German as their native language, with a further three German plus one other language. Participants’ self-rated English comprehension was 5.4/7. Results: Effects are expressed as SD units. Results are preliminary. Overall, discourse illusions behaved like other illusion types in that incorrect items were rated as significantly better than bad fillers (0.47 [0.75, 0.20]), but worse than correct items (-0.71 [-0.80, -0.61]). These effects were influenced by reading experience as measured by the German version of the Author Recognition Test [5]. Participants were also more susceptible to illusions in their L2 compared to their L1, with German incorrect items eliciting lower ratings than English incorrect items (-0.81, [-0.92, -0.69]). Outlook: This large dataset offers the opportunity to explore several individual-level variables and make more precise effect-size predictions for future experiments. More generally, establishing the existence of discourse illusions opens the door to many questions about the underlying mechanisms supporting language processing at the discourse level.
References

Examples
1a. Laura is thinking about going out tonight. One the one hand, she feels like dancing, because a great DJ will be playing. Many of her friends are going to the party as well. On the other hand, she can sleep in tomorrow. She is finding it difficult to decide.
1b. Laura is thinking about going out tonight. One the one hand, she feels like dancing, because a great DJ will be playing. Many of her friends are going to the party as well. On the other hand, she can’t sleep in tomorrow. She is finding it difficult to decide.

2. After her car accident, Clara had to go to court. She feared the judge, because he was so patient. In the end, Clara had to pay a large fine.

3. Andrew is thinking about becoming a caricaturist, but he knows that art is not an easy way to making a living. He gave his uncle a piece of chewing gum, in case the car took too long to arrive.