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ON ECONOMY IN WRITTEN LANGUAGE PRODUCTION: TELEGRAMS, SHORT LETTERS, AND NOTES

Abstract

This study investigates the effect of economy in different written texttypes. 60 German-speaking subjects were asked to shorten a written text (a letter) of 46 words. The targets were given as (i) telegrams, (ii) short letters and (iii) notes. All target texts were supposed to be 9 to 11 words long. Results show, that the three text types differ significantly in the following respects: amount of well-formed sentences, amount of nominal elements, presence of ellipsis. These findings are taken as evidence that economy per se cannot explain the special form of telegraphese; rather, in telegraphese we have a special register with special rules.

INTRODUCTION

Telegraphese is the register that adult native speakers use when writing telegrams (Tesak 1992). Even though there are hardly any empirical investigations about telegraphese, people generally assume that economy alone is *the* determining feature. It is unclear, however, whether economy alone is relevant, or whether there are other register-specific factors.

The question investigated in this study is whether economical constraints have the same effect in different registers or text styles. If economy is the main determining factor for telegraphese, the outcome should be the same for different text types, where the pressure of economy forces reduction of language output to a few words. If economy is not the only relevant factor, different text types should exhibit different characteristics, even if the length of the utterances is kept constant.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

Subjects were presented with a questionnaire. The text of the questionnaire was read aloud by the experimentor. Subjects were asked to transform a letter consisting of 46 words (see Appendix 1) into either (i) a telegram, (ii) a short letter, or (iii) a note, that conveys the main ideas of the source-text. The length of the targets was specified with 9-11 words; this point was stressed explicitly. In addition, subjects were requesed to use the vocabulary from the target text, and to keep sentences/ structures/ elements separated that are not directly linked with each other. Finally, subjects were asked to count the number of words they used and write it down on the experimental sheets. (See Appendix 2 for original instructions.) Then the subjects were given 15 minutes to complete the task.

SUBJECTS

60 adult native speakers of German participated in the experiment. For each condition (telegram, letter, note), 20 subjects were chosen. Table 1 gives details on subjects.

Table 1: Subjects

Condition	Tel.	Let.	Note
Average age	34	37	41
Gender m/f	10/10	11/9	9/11
Education: - high school	3	2	2
+ high school	12	14	13
+ university	5	4	5

RESULTS

Length

As can be seen in Table 2, the length of texts (measured in words) is different in the three conditions, even though the length was specified in the experimental design. Length tends to be in the upper end of the limits given in the letter condition. (Three subjects even used 12 words to complete the task, even though the experimental design specified the ultimate length with 11 words.) In the note condition, in most cases the subjects use the lower end of the limits. In between these two cases lies the telegram condition; there the distribution is almost equal across range of possibilities.

Table 2: Length

	Tel.	Let.	Note
9 words	8	1	16
10 words	6	5	4
11 words	6	11	0
12 words*	-	3	-
average	9.9	10.8	9.2

*incorrect according to experimental instructions

Units

Table 3 (see next page) gives number of units produced in the three conditions. The notion "unit" refers to sentences, T-phrases etc., to whatever was marked by the subjects as "belonging together". (Subjects were instructed to mark boundaries.) The note condition led to most units, the letter condition to least.

Table 3: Units

	Telegrams	Letters	Notes
Number of Units	64	38	39

Sentences

In Figure 1, the amount of well-formed grammatical sentences within all units produced is given. The letter condition almost exclusively led to sentences, whereas the amount of grammatical sentences is significantly lower in telegrams and notes.

Ellipsis

It can be deduced from Table 4, that a certain amount of units were not sentences. The question now is, whether all the non-sentences were ellipses. For purpose of classification, the strategy of reconstruction described in Tesak/Dittmann (1991) was used. Whenever possible, it was tried to reconstruct a grammatical sentential string. When this was not possible, no reconstruction was done. In Figure 2, the percentage of reconstructed units is given.

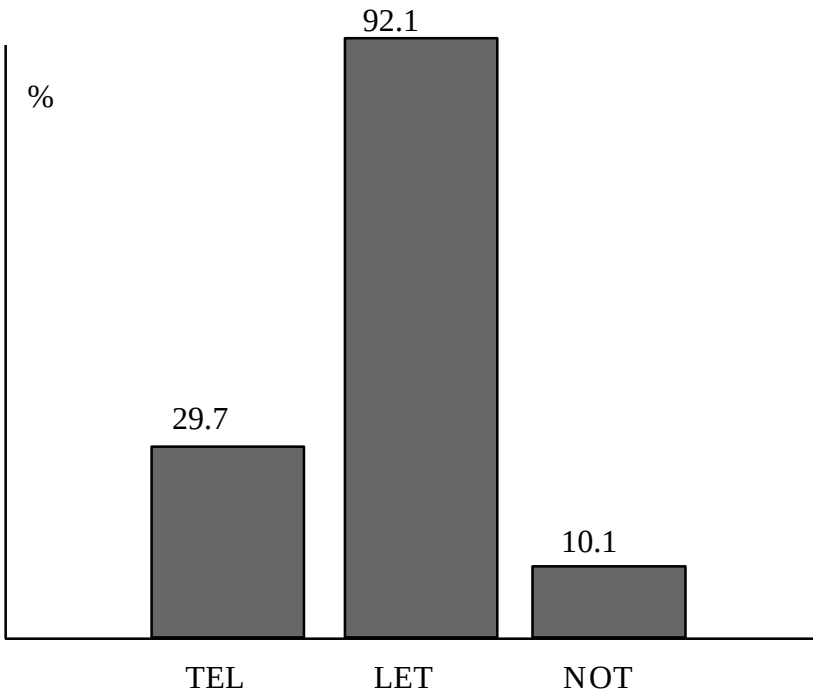

Figure 1: Percentage of sentences within texts

Table 4: Ellipsis

	Tel.	Let.	Note
non sentential units	45	3	89
reconstructed	37	2	27
percent	82.2	66.7	30.3

A striking result is the discrepancy between telegrams and notes. The former can be reconstructed to a large degree into grammatical sentences, whereas the latter can be reconstructed only to a small degree.

Nominal elements

Under the heading "nominal", the word classes of nouns, verbs, and adjectives are taken together. Figure N shows the amount of nominal words within the total number of words produced in the three conditions.

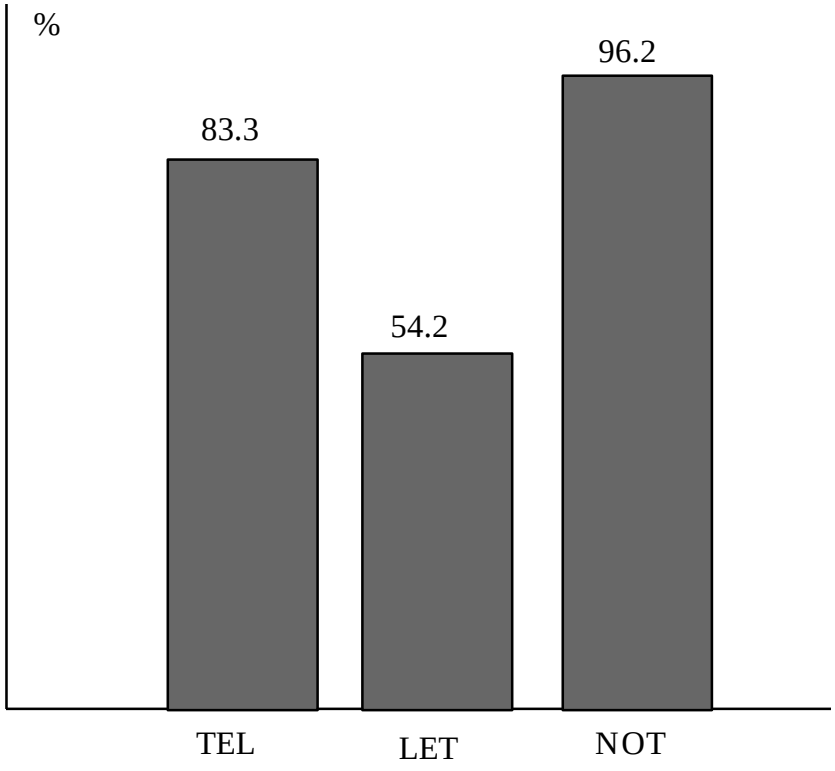

Figure 2: Amount of nominal elements

The amount of nominal elements is highest in notes, least in letters, the telegrams are in between, but closer to notes than to letters.

DISCUSSION

"Sentencehood" is a strong formal stylistic burden when writing letters. In the letter-condition, we almost exclusively deal with grammatical sentences. 3 subjects even violated the task-conditions by producing letters too long! (In full knowlede of their "mistake", since subjects had to count the number of words and write down the number; all three subjects did write 12!)

Within the telegrams and the notes, constraints of sentencehood do not apply even though structural constraints do apply in telegrams, but on a sub-sentential level. This is indicated by the high rate of reconstructable units in telegrams; i.e. the sub-sentential structures were detailed enough for reconstruction. (The existence of telegraphic rules is also stressed by the fact that the T-structures are rather uniform across subjects.) In notes, however, we encounter a style that in aphasiology would be called "serial naming" (Luria, 1970), mostly consisting of one-word-units, which is reflected in the high number of units in notes as compared to both letters and telegrams. And not surprising, the nominal elements in notes amount to 96.2 % as compared to 83.3 % in telegrams and 54.2 % in letters. The decrease of nominal elements reflects an increase in syntactical structure (both on sentential and sub-sentential levels).

The results clearly show that the three textypes differ in various parameters from each other. It can be concluded that telegraphese must have some other determining elements rather than economy alone. If economy would be the only factor, the three texttypes should not differ, since all had the same length limit (measured in words). It remains unclear, however, if telegraphese is a unique register within a given language, since it might be the case that other simplified registers (foreigner talk, etc.) have rules or surface structures similar to telegraphese.

APPENDIX 1

Source-text (original)

> Liebe Tante!
>
> Bei meiner Fahrt durch die Berge auf dem Weg zu Dir bin ich aufgehalten worden. Plötzlich ist mein Auto zusammen-gebrochen; ich war aber in der Nähe eines Hotels. Jetzt bin ich hier in der Rezeption im Hotel Krone in Neuhau. Hol mich bitte hier ab.
>
> Viele Grüße, Dein Josef
>
> (46 Wörter ohne Anrede und Unterschriften)

APPENDIX 2

Instruction:

Version 1: Machen Sie bitte aus dem vorliegenden langen Brieftext ein Telegramm, das neun bis elf Wörter enthält.

Version 2: Machen Sie bitte aus dem vorliegenden langen Brieftext einen sehr kurzen Brief, der neun bis elf Wörter enthält.

Version 3: Machen Sie bitte aus dem vorliegenden langen Brieftext eine Notiz, die neun bis elf Wörter enthält.

For all versions: Versuchen Sie, die wesentlichen inhaltlichen Elemente des Ausgangsbriefs zu erhalten. Verwenden Sie möglichst das Vokabular des Ausgangstextes. Beachten Sie auch die Strukturen des Ausgangstextes; es ist aber Ihnen überlassen, wie Sie den Zieltext gestalten. Lassen Sie bitte Anreden und Unterschriften weg. Zudem trennen Sie bitte einzelne Sätze/Strukturen/ Elemente voneinander, die nicht direkt zueinander gehören und Einheiten für sich bilden. Um die Auswertung zu erleichtern, geben Sie bitte die Zahl der von Ihnen verwendeten Wörter an.

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