

Phenomenon & overview

Topic Drop

German as a “zero-topic but non-pro-drop language” (Huang 1984: 549) allows for **Topic Drop (TD)**, i.e. the **omission** of exactly **one pre-verbal constituent** (S, O, Adv) in V2 sentences, esp. in (conceptually) spoken text types (Fries 1988).

- (1) Δ kann die Verabredung leider nicht einhalten.
 Δ can the appointment unfortunately not keep.
 ‘Unfortunately, (I) cannot keep the appointment.’ (FraC S1227)

Research questions

Is “Topic Drop” in fact Topic Drop?

- ▶ Is topicality a prerequisite for TD? (in terms of aboutness topic as “the expression whose referent the sentence is about”, Reinhart 1981: 57; set through a preceding question ① or through the grammatical function subject ②③)

Why is 1st person TD predominant in corpora (Auer 1993, Frick 2017)?

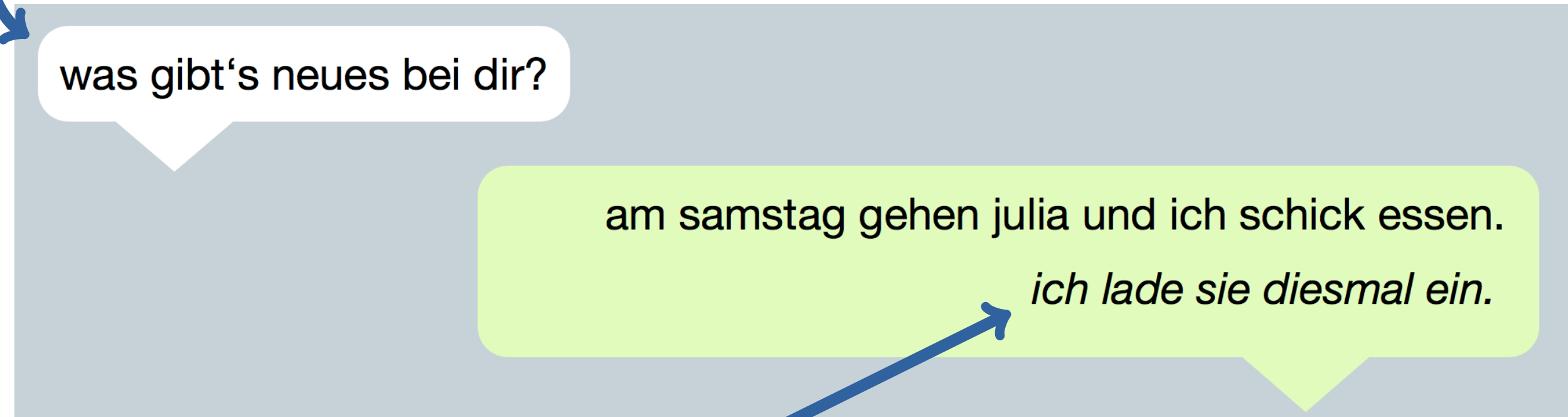
- ▶ Morphological marking of verb form (see Auer 1993: 198)? (1st person with marked inflection for full verbs ①② but not for modals ③)
- ▶ Predictability from context due to linguistic and extralinguistic factors?

Experiment ①: Full verbs & topic through question

Method

- 2 x 2 x 2 (TOPICALITY x PERSON x OMISSION)** within subjects design
- ▶ 24 items, 60 fillers, presented as text message dialogues
 - ▶ 48 participants (Web-based: *clickworker*) rated **acceptability** of utterances like (3) on 7-point Likert scale (7 = fully acceptable)
 - ▶ (Aboutness) topic is set through a **preceding question** (2)
 - ▶ Morphology of full verb and object pronoun determine subject of (3)

- (2) was gibt's neues bei (dir | julia)? (TOPIC 1ST | 3RD)
 are there any news from (you | julia)?



- (3) a. (ich) lade sie diesmal ein. (1ST PERSON, TOPIC: REAL. | OMM.)
 b. (sie) lädt mich diesmal ein. (3RD PERSON, TOPIC: REAL. | OMM.)
 ((I) invite her | (she) invites me) this time.

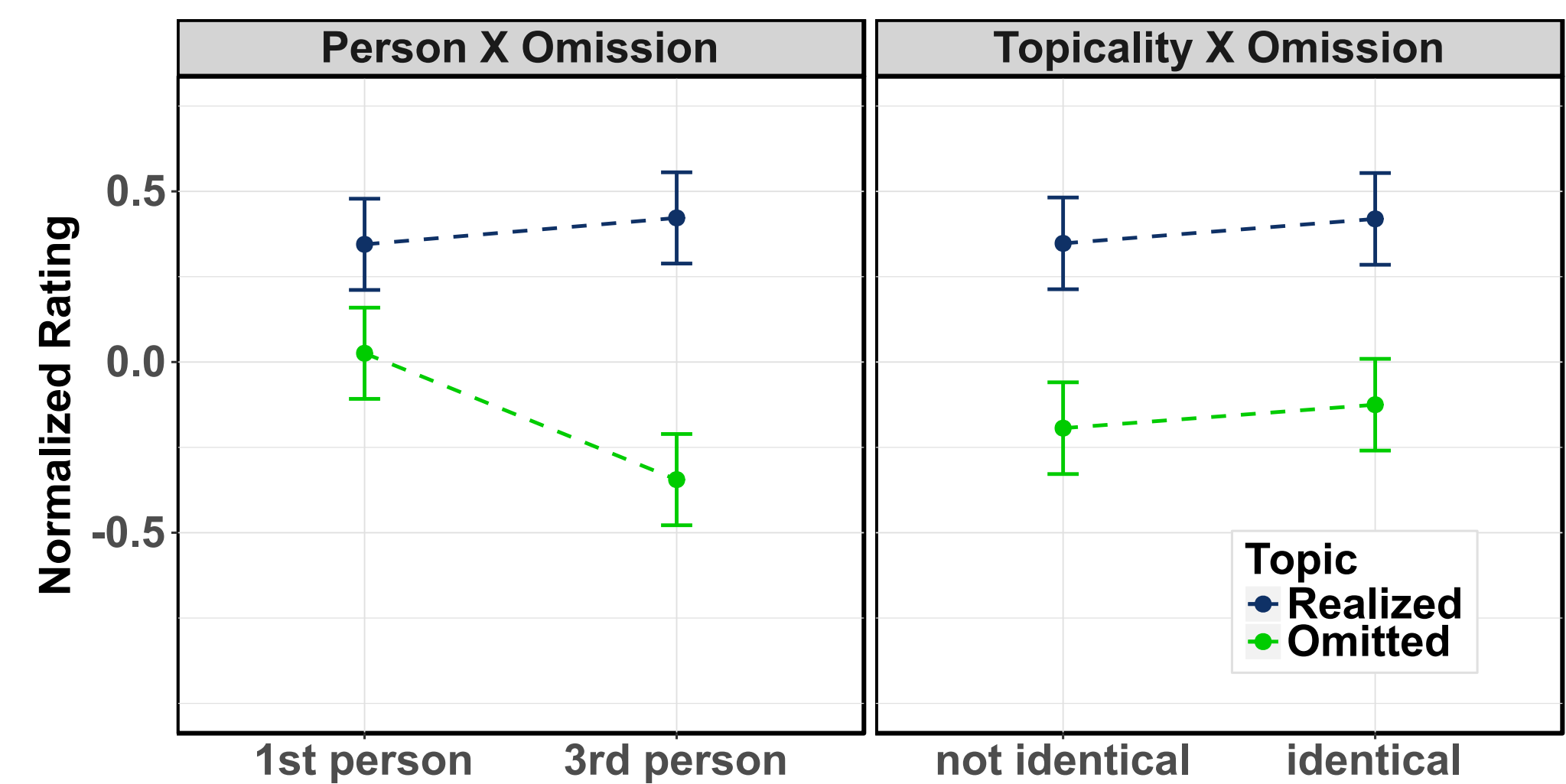


Figure 1: Normalized acceptability ratings and 95% confidence intervals for Exp. 1.

Results & discussion

Analysis with linear mixed effects models (random intercepts for subjects and items and by-subject and by-item random slopes for PERSON; lme4 in R):

- ▶ **No significant** interaction between TOPICALITY and OMISSION \Rightarrow **topicality without effect on TD or question inadequate** method to set topic?
- ▶ **Significant** interaction between PERSON:OMISSION ($\chi^2 = 22.4, p < 0.001$) \Rightarrow data is in line with **corpus findings** of Auer (1993) and Frick (2017) by revealing a **preference for 1st person** (pragmatic prominence of speaker?)

Experiment ②: Full verbs & topic through subject

Method

- 2 x 2 x 2 (TOPICALITY x PERSON x OMISSION)** within subjects design
- ▶ 24 items, 60 fillers, 48 participants (*clickworker*), 7-point Likert scale
 - ▶ Topic set through syntactic function as **subject** (5); **full verbs** (6a&b)

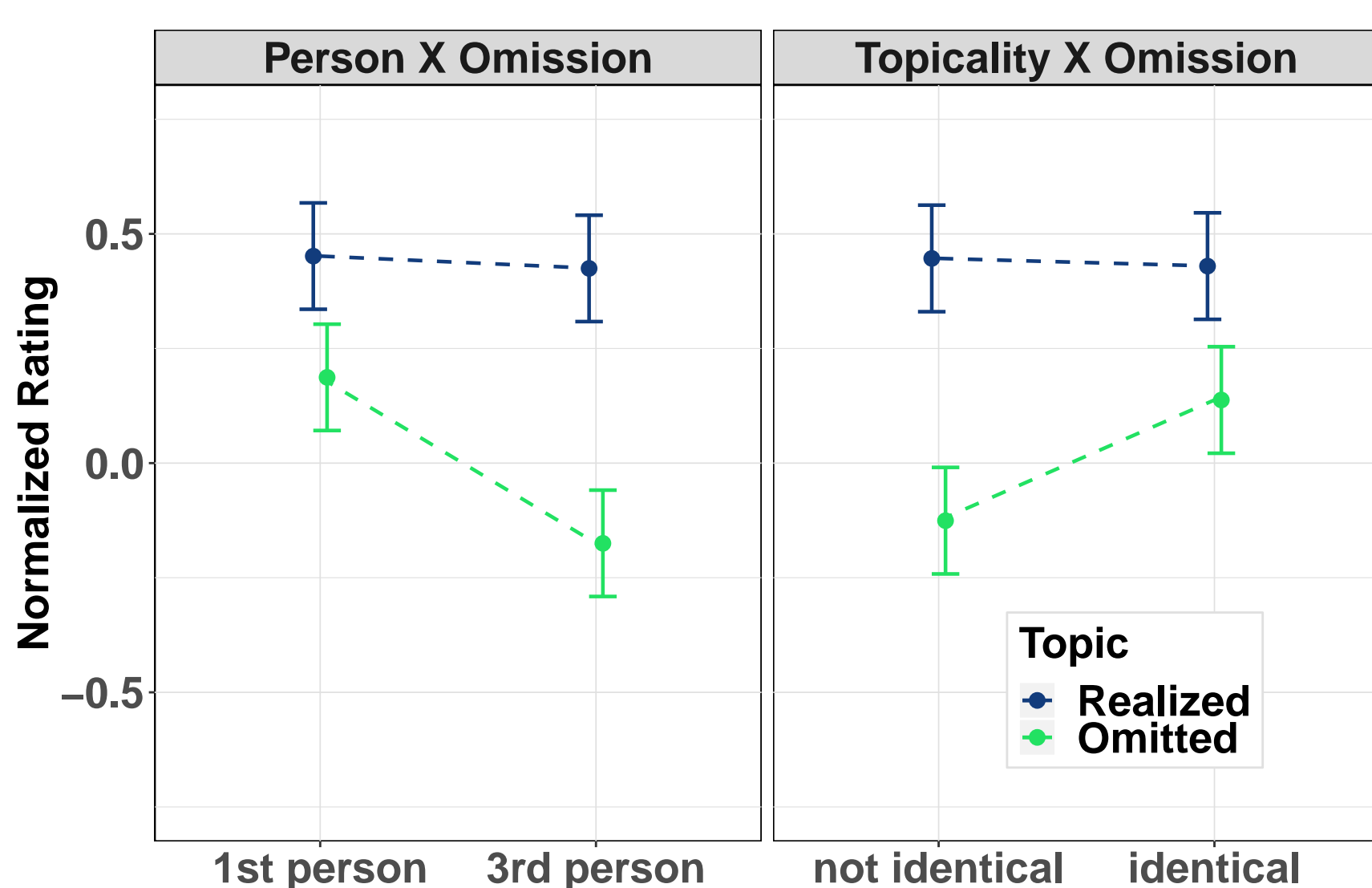


Figure 2: Normalized ratings & 95% CIs for Exp. 2.

- (4) A: hey, was gibt's neues? A: hey, what's up?
 (5) a. B: am samstag gehe ich mit julia schick essen. (TOPIC 1ST)
 b. B: am samstag geht julia mit mir schick essen. (TOPIC 3RD)
 B: on saturday, (I dine out with julia | julia dines out with me).
 (6) a. B: (ich) lade sie diesmal ein. (1ST PERSON)
 b. B: (sie) lädt mich diesmal ein. (3RD PERSON)
 B: ((I) invite her | (she) invites me) this time.
 (7) a. B: (ich) möchte sie diesmal einladen. (1ST PERSON)
 b. B: (sie) möchte mich diesmal einladen. (3RD PERSON)
 B: ((I) want to invite her | (she) wants to invite me) this time.

Experiment ③: Modal verbs & topic through subject

Method

- 2 x 2 x 2 (TOPICALITY x PERSON x OMISSION)** within subjects design
- ▶ 24 items, 60 fillers, 48 participants (*clickworker*), 7-point Likert scale
 - ▶ Topic set through syntactic function as **subject** (5); **modal verbs** (6c&d)

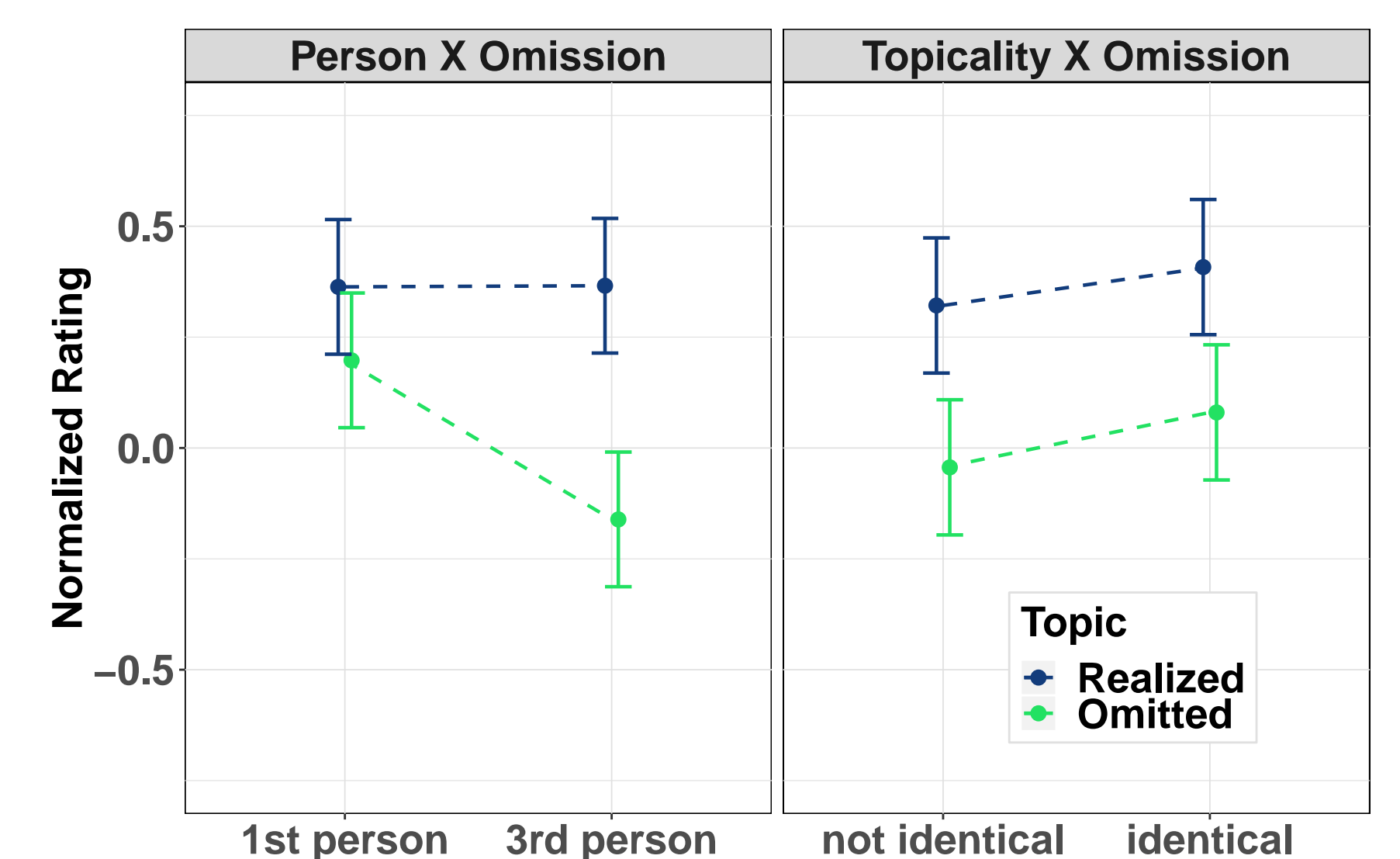


Figure 3: Normalized ratings & 95% CIs for Exp. 3.

Results & discussion

Analysis with linear mixed effects models (random intercepts for subjects and items and by-subject and by-item random slopes for PERSON):

- ▶ **Replication** of the PERSON:OMISSION interaction ($\chi^2 = 13.93, p < 0.001$) \Rightarrow data confirm again **preference for 1st person**
- ▶ **Significant** TOPICALITY:OMISSION interaction ($\chi^2 = 9.76, p < 0.01$) \Rightarrow data **support** role of **topicality** for TD (is **topicality itself** a prerequisite or is the topicalized element simply more **predictable** and, thus, more easily **recoverable**?)

Results & discussion

Analysis with linear mixed effects models (random intercepts for subjects and items and by-subject random slopes for PERSON and by-item random slopes for all 3 IVs):

- ▶ **Replication** of the PERSON:OMISSION interaction ($\chi^2 = 17.07, p < 0.001$) \Rightarrow data confirm **preference for 1st person** also with **modal verbs**, thus **disproving** Auer's (1993) explanation adducing **morphological marking** of the verb
- ▶ **No significant** TOPICALITY:OMISSION interaction \Rightarrow **no effect of topicality** (because unlike in ② verb form does not facilitate disambiguation?)

Conclusion

Summary

- ▶ **Topicality** seems **not** to be a **sufficient condition** for TD (influence only in ②) \Rightarrow possible correlation with **structural parallelism** and **subject continuation preferences** (see e.g. Colonna et al. 2012 for pronoun resolution in German), and interaction with cues like **morphological marking** by **facilitating disambiguation**
- ▶ **1st person** is **preferred** over 3rd with TD **regardless** of morphological marking (the cue “grammatical person” persists) \Rightarrow this rules out Auer's (1993) explanation and favors one based on **predictability** due to the speaker's prominence in the speech situation

Outlook

- Further investigations to determine influence of extralinguistic cues and context:**
- ▶ **Modulate the context** to modify the predictability of the omitted element
 - ▶ **Compare a discourse** with one continuous topic to one with a lot of changing topics with respect to the influence of topicality on TD
- Open question:** Which process is involved in reconstructing the omitted element in Exp. 3 after the encounter of the object pronoun?
- ▶ **disambiguation** after having considered two or more alternatives?
 - ▶ **reanalysis** after having pursued a wrong analysis (1st person as subject)?