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The aesthetic paradox in processing literary vs. expository texts

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Theoretical background

- The aesthetic paradox (Christmann et al., 2011)
  - Aesthetic objects are related to positive experiences
  - The processing of aesthetic objects demands effort
  - Cognitive load during information processing leads to negative results
  - Tension between the appreciation of aesthetic objects and their strenuous processing
  - Solution: When adopting an aesthetic attitude, cognitive load is even appreciated
Definition of concepts

• Reception attitude:
  specifies the kind of genre features that is expected when processing an object
  ▫ Aesthetic attitude: expectation that aesthetic objects are potentially ambiguous (example: poem)
  ▫ Factual attitude: expectation that factual objects are unambiguous (example: newspaper report)
Object of research

Investigation of the aesthetic paradox using the example of literary vs. expository texts

Addressed aspects:
1. Generating the aesthetic reception attitude
2. Relation between reception attitude and evaluation of cognitive load
1. Generating the aesthetic reception attitude

Exploratory studies

- Aim: induction of reception attitude independent from text
- Material: two text excerpts, one of them literary, one expository
- 5 Methods to activate reception attitude, amongst others:
  - Staff member of public library
  - Review of the text
  - Booth operator at a flea market
1. Generating the aesthetic reception attitude

Exploratory studies

- **Results:**
  Independent from method of induction: aesthetic variant more successful than factual variant
  Even if participants read the expository text, they were convinced of the text being literary

- **Explanation: Narrative text structure**

- **Definition of narrativity:**
  Narrative texts: a narrator tells a story
  Non-narrative texts: no narrator, no story

- **Emerging hypothesis:**
  Reception attitude cannot be manipulated independently from text narrativity
1. Generating the aesthetic reception attitude

Study 1

• **Hypothesis**
  - Reception attitude (aesthetic vs. factual) depends on text structure (narrative vs. non-narrative)

• **Material**
  - Two narrative text excerpts, one of them literary, one expository
  - Two non-narrative text excerpts, one of them literary, one expository
1. Generating the aesthetic reception attitude

Results: Text structure -> reception attitude

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reception attitude</th>
<th>Text structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aesthetic</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>factual</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undecided</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi² = 46.32; df = 1; p = .000
→ Highly significant effect of narrativity on reception attitude
→ For generating a certain reception attitude, it did not matter whether texts were in fact literary or expository
→ Narrativity turned out to be critical for generating the reception attitude
2. Relation between text structure and evaluation of cognitive load

Study 2

• Hypothesis
  ▫ Evaluation of cognitive load (positive vs. negative) depends on text structure (narrative vs. non-narrative)

• Procedure
  – Read the text
  – Establishment of cognitive load: investigator asked demanding questions
  1. Participants listed as many text continuations as possible
  2. Investigator presented up to 7 text continuations, participants commented on their plausibility
2. Relation between text structure and evaluation of cognitive load

- **Measurement of cognitive load evaluation**
  - Content-analytically developed rating scale: Plausibility appraisals were categorized by approval/disapproval and level of detail
  - Development of response length during the first five interview answers
  - Number of continuations participants mentioned in the first part of the interview
2. Relation between text structure and evaluation of cognitive load

- **Results**
  - Content-analytical measure: No evidence for expected relation
  - Development of response length: text structure did not influence development of response length, but tended to influence the mean response length (not significant)
  - Number of mentioned continuations: hypothesized relation confirmed (Pillai’s trace: .309, $F=0.374$, hypothesis df=1, error df=21, $p=.006$)
Sum up and discussion

• Sum up
  ▫ Narrativity was critical for activating an aesthetic attitude
  ▫ Appreciation of cognitive load when processing aesthetic objects was partly confirmed -> supporting aesthetic paradox

• Open questions
  ▫ Are there other textual features promoting a certain reception attitude?
  ▫ How to measure the evaluation of cognitive load?
Thank you very much for your attention!