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# The aesthetic paradox in processing literary vs. expository texts

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*55<sup>th</sup> TeaP*  
**Vienna, March, 24<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

## 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

		Text structure	
		non-narrative	narrative
Reception attitude	aesthetic	0	21
	factual	31	2
	undecided	0	9

$\chi^2 = 46.32$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p = .000$

- 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,  $F=.374$ , 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!