

## **A crosslinguistic and acquisitional investigation on polarity contrast**

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Abstract:

In this talk I am going to present an investigation on the expression of (affirmative) polarity contrast (e.g. 'the child DID cry') from a typological and acquisitional perspective. A dialogue task was used to collect experimental evidence in four different languages: Dutch, German, French and Italian. In a first study on Dutch and German it was found that even two closely related languages behave differently when it comes to signalling the same pragmatic function. Contrastive polarity is expressed by German speakers using so-called verum focus (a high-falling pitch accent on the verb, 'das Kind HAT geweint'), whereas Dutch speakers mostly use the particle *wel* ('het kind heeft wel gehuild'). The same contrast was also tested in French and Italian, which were predicted not to encode polarity contrast in a systematic way. The experimental results showed an intonational contrast, much like the verum focus of German, in one third of the cases. This contrast had not been documented before. Yet, it was found that contrastive polarity was expressed much less frequently in French and Italian, thereby suggesting that compared to Dutch and German, the information unit 'polarity' may play a less important role for discourse coherence. Data from L2 production provided further support for these typological differences. Possible implications for language processing are discussed in light of preliminary findings suggesting that language-specific expressions for polarity may influence speakers' interpretation of polarity.