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The Effect of Position on Understanding: Preposed vs Inserted “selon X” (according to X)

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INTRODUCTION

Centering theory (Grosz et al., 1983, Walker et al., 1998) establishes a structural relationship between the form of referential expressions and attentional focus. It predicts specifically that highly focused entities tend to be realized with less marked forms (e.g. pronouns) and that factors such as grammatical status or surface position affect prominence. The experiments reported here aimed to test a claim put forward in linguistic studies on French evidential adverbials (Schrepfer, 2005) concerning the functioning of the preposed position as a potential frame influencing the following pronominal resolution: a preposed prepositional phrase (PP), but not an inserted one, frames an informational bloc in which antecedents are easily accessed compared to antecedents located outside the bloc.

Counterbalanced Factors

Prepositional Phrase Position
Target Pronoun Gender
→ Preposed or Inserted
→ Gender of the NP complement of the evidential PP (here the Speaker) or Previous Grammatical Subject Gender

EXPERIMENT 1

Same material with two introductory sentences added
P2: Vincent/Francine a trouvé, selon Francine, un stage dans une agence de publicité.
(P2: Vincent has found, according to Francine, an advertising agency internship.)

Hypothesis
Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun
Quick « Inside Frame » Reading

Interpretation
In Preposed Position → No Reading time difference of Target sentence whatever the Pronoun
Possibly due to the first mention effect reported by Genbauder et al. (1989)

EXPERIMENT 2

Same material with two introductory sentences added
P2: Vincent/Francine a trouvé, selon Francine, un stage dans une agence de publicité.
(P2: Vincent has found, according to Francine, an advertising agency internship.)

Counterbalanced Factors: Prominence x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis
The Speaker in introduction
The Subject in introduction
→ Same results in Expt. 1
→ In the Preposed Position, shorter Reading time for Subject Gender Pronoun than for Gender Pronoun

EXPERIMENT 3

Target sentences of Expt. 2 stimuli are replaced
P2: Il/Elle a mis à contribution proches et relations du secteur en début d’année…
(He/She asked some friends and colleagues for help early this year…)

Hypothesis
Expected Effect of antecedent Prominence on the Pronoun resolution of Target sentence as predicted in Expt. 2

SUMMARY

In our first experiment, results were similar to those obtained by Gordon et al. (1993) in their 5th test with the Repeated Name Penalty Paradigm, results they interpreted as indicating that “an initial and non subject” or a “non-initial and subject” entity equally provides prominence. Our second experiment, however, suggests that the rather robust effect obtained with our material was probably not only a question of surface order. Our third experiment shows the importance of the verbal phrase in our preceding results. Altogether, these experiments confirm the importance of antecedent prominence in pronominal resolution as pointed out by Centering Theory and suggest a new factor of prominence, besides surface order and grammatical status, namely the semantic affinity between Evidential Preposition and subsequent Verb Phrases whose Subject pronoun is the mentioned Speaker. The Speaker’s point of view signaled by the PP seems to prime opinion VP, possibly changing the narrative from an objective function to an overview of a specific narrative. The Subject Pronoun is also strongly primed in the new condition, and the PP seems to.REG

Bibliographie