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To cite this version:
Anne-Marie Liliane Argenti, Michel Charolles. The Effect of Position on Understanding: Preposed vs Inserted 'selon X' ('according to X'). AMLaP 2011 - Architectures and Mechanisms for Language Processing, Sep 2011, Paris, France. halshs-00661755

HAL Id: halshs-00661755
https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00661755
Submitted on 31 Jan 2012

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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 nominal 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.

EXPERIMENT 1

Counterbalanced Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prepositional Phrase Position</th>
<th>Preposed or Inserted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target Pronoun Gender</td>
<td>Gender of the NP complement of the evidential PP (here the Speaker) or Previous Grammatical Subject Gender</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Material

P1: Selon Francine, Vincent a trouvé un stage dans une agence de publicité.
   (Vincent found, according to Francine, an advertising agency internship.)

P2: Elle apprécie que les candidats incluent une expérience professionnelle.
   (She appreciates the fact that the curriculum includes a work experience...).

Hypothesis

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

Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun
Slow « Outside Frame » Reading

Methodology: Self-Paced Reading Paradigm with P2 as Target + Comprehension task
Participants: 24 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect: Shorter Reading time of Target sentence for Subject’s Gender Pronoun (F(1,23)=7, p<0.01)
Interaction: Shorter Reading time for Inserted Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,23)=4.45, p=0.046)

Interpretation

In Preposed Position no Reading time difference of Target sentence whatever the Pronoun

Possible due to the first mention effect reported by Genesier et al. (1989)

Adjunction of a new factor to manipulate protagonist Prominence

EXPERIMENT 2

Counterbalanced Factors: Proximity x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis

The Speaker in introduction
Same results in Exp. 1

The Subject in introduction
In the Preposed Position, shorter Reading time for Subject Gender Pronoun than for Speaker Gender Pronoun

Participants: 64 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect: Shorter Reading of Target sentence for Subject Gender Pronoun (F(1,63)=1.2, p=0.26)

Interaction

Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,12)=4.3, p<0.04)

Interpretation

No effect of the Proximity manipulated factor

Possibly due to interaction between the meaning of the evidential PP and opinion verbs such as: appreciate, find, think, hope...

Replacement of the opinion verbs of Target sentences by verbs describing the Subject’s action

EXPERIMENT 3

Target sentences of Expt. 2 stimuli are replaced
P1: Elle a aimé à contribuer proches et relations du secteur en début d’année...
   (She/He 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 Exp. 2

Participants: 48 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect: as previously (F(1,47)=16, p<0.001)

No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction (F(1,48)=0.65, p=0.4)

Prominence x Pronoun Interaction
Longer Reading for Subject in introduction x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition (F(1,48)=6.96, p<0.01)

Interpretation

Without opinion verbs, Reading of Target utterances depends on antecedents’ prominence given by their grammatical status and their number of occurrences

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 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 nominal 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.

Bibliographie


Research supported in part by Grant ANR-06-BLANC-0162 - Spatial Framing Adverbials - directed by M. Charolles et L. Sarda, 2006-2009

Presented at AMLaP 2011, Paris, France