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Anne-Marie Argenti, Michel Charolles

To cite this version:
Anne-Marie 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)

Anne-Marie ARGENTI 1,2, Michel CHAROLLES 2,3

1 Unité mixte de recherche 8904 du CNRS, 2École Normale Supérieure, 3Université de Paris III

Contact: anne-marie.argenti@ens.fr

INTRODUCTION

Centering theory (Groen 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 (Schreper, 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.

EXPERIMENT 1

Counterbalanced Factors

Prepositional Phrase Position

Target Pronoun Gender

Preposed or Inserted

Gender of the NP complement of the evidential PP (here the Speaker)

Material

P1: Selon Francine, Vincent a trouvé un stage dans une agence de publicité.

P2: Il/Elle apprécie que les cours d'études incluent une expérience professionnelle.

Hypothesis

Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun

Quick → Inside Frame → Reading

Insertion 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 the Target sentence whatever the Pronoun

Possibly due to the first mention effect reported by Gernsbacher et al. (1989)

ADJUNCTION OF A NEW FACTOR TO MANIPULATE PROTAGONIST PROMINENCE

Two introductory sentences are added to the previous texts: the first sentence starts with one of the protagonists, the Speaker or the Subject.

EXPERIMENT 2

Same material with two introductory sentences added

P2: Vincent/Francois prépare un master de gestion à Paris-Dauphine.

P4: Les programmes comprennent des enseignements théoriques et des mises en situation.

Counterbalanced Factors: Prominence x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis

The Speaker in introduction

Same results in Expt. 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(1,47)=7, p<0.001)

Interaction:

Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,23)2=4.3, p=0.04)

Interpretation

No effect of the Prominence manipulated factor

Possibly due to interaction between the meaning of the evidential PP and opinion verbs such as ‘appreciate, find, think, hope...’ systematically used in Target sentences

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

P2: Il/Elle a fait centre du scalp et relations du sein en début d’année...

Hypothesis

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

Participants:

48 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect:

as previously (F(1,47)=16, p=0.01)

No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction

(F(1,20)=0.65, p=0.43)

Prominence x Pronoun Interaction

Longer Reading for Subject in introduction x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition (F(1,20)=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 observed 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 Verbal 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 situation to the story concerning the subjectivity of the Speaker. This implies that the preposing of a pronoun as a preceding PP must be considered both as a linguistic choice and an act of speech with a specific communicative function (Charolles, 1990; 1995).

Bibliography


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