The Effect of Position on Understanding: Preposed vs Inserted 'selon X' ('according to X')
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EXPERIMENT 1

Counterbalanced Factors

Prepositional Phrase Position

Target Pronoun Gender

Proposed or Inserted

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

Previous Grammatical Subject Gender

Material

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

According to Francine, Vincent found an advertising agency internship.]

P2: [Elle apprécie que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle...

She appreciates that the curriculum includes a work experience...]

Hypothesis

Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun

Quick x Inside Frame > Reading

Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun

Slow Reading due to inaccessibility of antecedent

Participants: 24 students (University of Paris III)

Bibliographie


Gernsbacher et al. (1989)


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 proposed position as a potential frame influencing the following propositional resolution: a proposed 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.

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

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

Expt. 1: Position x Pronoun

adj. of a new factor to manipulate protagonist Prominence

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

EXPERIMENT 2

SAME MATERIAL WITH TWO INTRODUCTORY SENTENCES ADDED

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

Vincent/Francine is taking a Master in Management at Paris-Dauphine.]

P1: [Les programmes comprennent des enseignements théoriques et des mises en situations.

(The syllabus includes theoretical knowledge and applied skills.)

Hypothesis

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

Participants: 64 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect: Shorter Reading time of Target sentence for Speaker Gender Pronoun (F1(1,63)=7.6, p=0.007)

Interaction: Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F1(1,63)=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

P1: [Elle a un à contribution précieux et relations du secteur en début de année…

(He/She asked some friends and colleagues for help early this year…)

P2: [Selon Francine, Vincent a trouvé un stage dans une agence de publicité…

According to Francine, Vincent has found an advertising agency internship.]

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 (F1(1,47)=16, p<0.001)

No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction (F1(1,47)=0.45, p=0.5)

Prominence x Pronoun Interaction

Longer Reading for Subject in introduction x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition (F1(1,47)=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 shows the importance of the verbal phrase in our preceding results. Altogether, these experiments confirm the importance of antecedent prominence in propositional 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 story about the previous Grammatical Subject to a story concerning the subjectivity of the Speaker.