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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 pronominall 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) or 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 : Il/Elle apprécie que les étudiants utilisent une expérience professionnelle… (He/She appreciates the fact that the curriculum includes a work experience…)

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

P2 : Il/Elle apprécie que les étudiants utilisent une expérience professionnelle… (He/She appreciates the fact that the curriculum includes a work experience…)

Hypothesis

Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun

Quick x Inside Frame > Reading last result shows that Preposed PPs fulfill a specific framing function (Grosz, 1987) in certain conditions which further studies will focus on and develop

Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun

Slow Reading due to inaccessibility of antecedent

Inserted Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun

Quickest Reading consistent with Centering Theory

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 whatever the Pronoun Condition

Interaction : No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction

No evidence of the prominence manipulated factor

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

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 situation. (The syllabus includes theoretical knowledge and applied skills.)

Counterbalanced Factors : Pronomx Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis

The Speaker in introduction

Same results as 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(1,63)= 7.6, p=0.007)

Interaction : No evidence of the prominence manipulated factor

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

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 pronoun 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. This

Bibliographie


