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

Material
P1: [Selon Françoise, 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 « Inside Frame » Reading
Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun → Slow « Outside Frame » Reading

Methodology
Self-Paced Reading Paradigm with P2 as Target x 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: No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction (F(1,23)=0.65, p=0.8)

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

Adjunction 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
Counterbalanced Factors: Pronomince 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

Methodology
Same material with two introductory sentences added
P2: [Vincent/Françoise prépare un master de gestion à Paris-Dauphine.]
(Vincent/Francine is preparing 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....)

Hypothesis
The Speaker in introduction
- In the Preposed Position, Speaker Gender Pronoun
The Subject in introduction
- In the Preposed Position, Subject Gender Pronoun

Participants: 64 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS
Main effect: Shorter Reading time for Target subject for Gender Pronoun (F(1,12)=3.6, p=0.06)
Interaction: Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,25)=4.3, p=0.04)

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

Methodology
Same material with two introductory sentences added
P2: [Vincent/Françoise a trouvé, selon Francine, un stage dans une agence de publicité.]
(Vincent/Francine found, according to Francine, an advertising agency internship.)
P1: [Selon Françoise, Vincent a trouvé un stage dans une agence de publicité.]
[According to Francine, Vincent found an advertising agency internship.]

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(1,18)=0.65, p=0.5)
Prominence x Pronoun Interaction
Longer Reading for Subject in introduction x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition (F(1,18)=6.96, p<0.01)

Bibliography

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 story about the previous Grammatical Subject to a story concerning the subjectivity of the Speaker. This is a good approach for an inter-disciplinary study on Pragmalinguistic and Psycholinguistic focus on a specific function (Centering) in French evidentiality. The results confirm the importance of the PP as a frame for the next referential expression.