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 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
  - Preposed
  - Inserted
- Target Pronoun Gender
  - 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.]
(Vincent found, according to Francine, an advertising agency internship.)
P2: [Elle apprécie que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle…]
(Her She appreciates the fact that the curriculum includes a work experience…)

Hypothesis

- Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun
  - Quick « Inside Frame » Reading
  - Slow « Outside Frame » Reading
- Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun
  - Slow Reading due to inaccessibility of antecedent
  - Quick 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 for Subject’s Gender Pronoun
(F1(1,23)=7, p=0.01)
Interaction: Shorter Reading time for Inserted Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun condition
than for others (F1(1,23)= 4.85, p=0.04)
Interpretation

In Preposed Position → no Reading time difference of Target sentence whatever the Pronoun
Possibly due to the first mention effect reported by Grosbuecher 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.)]

Hypothesis

- Same result as Expt. 1
- The Speaker in introduction as a potential frame for the Subject (Vincent/Francine)

Participants: 64 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect: Shorter Reading of Target sentence for Gender Pronoun
(F1(1,63)=7.6, p=0.007)
Interaction: Without opinion verbs, Reading of Target sentence depends on antecedent’s prominence given by their grammatical status and number of occurrences

Interpretation

According to Francine, Vincent found an advertising agency internship.
Possibly due to interaction between the meaning of the evidential PP and opinion verbs such as « appreciate, like ». 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 effect might be explained by the first-mention effect reported by Grosbuecher et al. (1989).

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 “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 phrase 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 effect might be explained by the first mention effect reported by Grosbuecher et al. (1989).