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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 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) 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: Elle a apprécié que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle... (She appreciated the fact that the curriculum includes a work experience...)

Hypothesis
Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun
Quick « Inside Frame » Reading
Longer Reading for Inserted 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)=4.48, p=0.046)

Interpretation

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

Adjustment 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/Francine est en train de faire un stage à Paris-Dauphine.
(Vincent/Francine is taking a Master in Management at Paris-Dauphine.)
P4: Les programmes comportent des enseignements théoriques et des mises en situation....
(The syllabus includes theoretical knowledge and applied skills...)

Counterbalanced Factors: Prominence x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis
The Speaker in introduction
Quick « Inside Frame » Reading
The Subject in introduction
Longer Reading for Subject in introduction x Speaker

Methodology
Participants: 64 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect: Shorter Reading time of Target sentence for Subject Gender Pronoun (F(1,23)=7.6, p<0.007)

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

EXPERIMENT 3

Target sentences of Exp. 2 stimuli are replaced
P5: Elle a entendu à propos de ses notes un critique des voeux d'année....
(He/She heard 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 Exp. 2

Methodology
Participants: 48 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect: as previously (F(1,14)=16, p<0.001)
No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction (F(1,18)=0.85, p=0.3)

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-last result shows that Preposed PPs fulfil a specific framing function (Charolles, 1987) in certain conditions which further studies will focus on and develop.

Bibliographie
Schrepfer, G. (2005), Incidence des formes de reprise des SP en... (Influence of repeated forms of SP in...)

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