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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 pronoun 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

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 apprécie que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle.

(“She appreciates 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 : 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 Condition → Quick « Inside Frame » Reading

Preposed Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun Condition → Slow « Outside Frame » Reading

Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun Condition → Slow Reading due to inaccessibility of antecedent

Inserted Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun Condition → 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 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)

Adjustment of a new factor to manipulate protagonist Prominence

Two introductory sentences are added to the previous texts: 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 situation.

(“The syllabus includes theoretical knowledge and applied skills.”)

Counterbalanced Factors: Prominence x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis

The Speaker in introduction → Same results in Exp1.

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)=3.6, p<0.007)

Interaction: Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,252)=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

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 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 pronoun 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.

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