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Anne-Marie Argenti, Michel Charolles

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

UMR 8094
Anne-Marie ARGENTI 1,2, Michel CHAROLLES 3
1 Unité mixte de recherche 8094 du CNRS, 2Ecole Normale Supérieure, 3Université de Paris III
Contact : anne-marie.argenti@ens.fr

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
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 emploi dans une agence de publicité...’
(according to Francine, Vincent found an advertising agency internship…)
(P1 : Elle apprécie que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle...)
(she appreciates that the curriculum includes a work experience...)

P1 : ‘ Selon Francine, Vincent a trouvé un emploi 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 → Shorter Reading for Subject’s Gender Pronoun
Quick In Frame Reading
Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun
Slow Out of 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)=4.45, 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 Gernsbacher 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

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 : ‘ Il/Elle apprécie que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle...’
(she appreciates that the curriculum includes a work experience...)

Counterbalanced Factors : Pronoxence x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis
The Speaker in introduction ➔ Same results in Exp. 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 : Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,63)=4, p=0.04)

Interpretation
No effect of the Pronoxence 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 Expt. 2 stimuli are replaced
P2 : ‘ Il/Elle a aimé à contribuer proches et relations du secteur en début d’année...’
(she/he asked some friends and colleagues for help early this year...)

Hypothesis
Expected Effect of antecedent Prominence on the Pronoxence resolution of Target sentence as predicted in Exp. 2

Participants : 48 students (University of Paris III)

RESULTS

Main effect : as previously (F(1,47)= 16, p < 0.001)
No longer any Position x Pronoxence Interaction (F(1,47)=0.95, p=0.3)

Interpretation
Without opinion verbs, Reading of Target utterances depends on antecedents’ pronoxence 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-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 pronoxence 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