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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 resolutions : 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
Proposed 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 trouv£ un stage dans une agence de publicit£.
(According to Francine, Vincent found an advertising agency internship.)
P2: Elle appr£c£e que les cursus stagiaires incluent une exp£rience professionnelle... (She appreciates that the curriculum includes a work experience...)
P1: Vincent a trouv£, selon Francine, un stage dans une agence de publicit£.
(Vincent found, according to Francine, an advertising agency internship.)
P2: Elle appr£c£e que les cursus stagiaires incluent une exp£rience professionnelle... (She appreciates that the curriculum includes a work experience...)

Hypothesis
Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun
Quick « Inside Frame » Reading
Promoted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun
Slow « Outside Frame » Reading
Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender Pronoun
Slow Reading due to inaccessibility of antecedent
Inserted Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun
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 for 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 Proposed Position ➔ no Reading time difference of Target sentence whatever the Pronoun
Possibly due to the first mention effect reported by Genushaker et al. (1989)


EXPERIMENT 2
Counterbalanced Factors : Prominence x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis
The Speaker in introduction ➔ Same results in Exp. 1
The Subject in introduction ➔ In the Proposed 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(1.43)=7.6, 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

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” and 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.

SUMMARY

Bibliographie

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