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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 (Schreper, 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

**Counteredbalanced Factors**

- **Prepositional Phrase Position**
  - Preposed or Inserted
- **Target Pronoun Gender**
  - 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.
(Vincent found, according to Francine, an advertising agency internship.)

P2: Elle apprécie que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle.
(He/She appreciates the fact that the curriculum includes work experience...)

**Hypothesis**

- Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun
  - Quick « Inside Frame » Reading
- Inserted 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 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)

**Adjunction 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...)

**Counterveraledbalanced Factors:** Prominence 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(1,48)=3.6, p=0.037)

**Interaction**

Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,23)=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

**EXPERIMENT 3**

**Target sentences of Exp. 2 stimuli are replaced**

P2: Elle a une attente de missions et relations de contact en début d’année...
(He/She asked 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

**Participants:** 48 students (University of Paris III)

**Results**

**Main effect:** as previously (F(1,47)=16, p < 0.001)

**No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction**

Prominence x Pronoun Interaction

Longer Reading for Subject in introduction x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition (F(1,180)=6.96, p < 0.01)

**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 fulfill a specific framing function (Charolles, 1987) in certain conditions which further studies will focus on and develop

**Bibliographie**


