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 : Un fim de la famille, Vincent a trouvé un emploi dans une agence de publicité. (Grosz et al., 1983) [According to Grosz, 1983 an advertising agency]

P2 : Elle apprécie que les cursus étudiants incluent une expérience professionnelle. (Schrepfer, 2005) [Concerning Schrepfer, 2005]

Hypothesis

Preposed Position x Subject’s Gender

Quick « Inside Frame » Reading

Inserted Position x Speaker’s Gender

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 for Target sentence for Subject’s Gender Pronoun

Interaction : Shorter reading time for Inserted Position x Subject’s Gender Pronoun condition than for others

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 the mention of one of the protagonists, the Speaker or the Subject.

Experiment 2

Same material with two introductory sentences added

P2 : Vincent/Française prépare un master de gestion à Paris-Dauphine.

P1 : Les programmes comptrent des enseignements théoriques et des mises en situation... (The syllabus includes theoretical and applied skills...)

Counterbalanced Factors : Prominence x Position x Pronoun

Hypothesis

The Speaker in introduction

Same results as Expt. 1

The Subject in introduction

In the Preposed Position, shorter Reading for Subject

Results

Main effect : Shorter Reading of Target sentence for Subject’s Gender Pronoun (F(1,47)=7.76, p=0.007)

Interaction

Longer Reading for Inserted Position x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition than for others (F(1,23)=4.45, p=0.046)

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 Expt. 2 stimuli are replaced

P2 : Elle a une affinité pour l'économie et elle se passionne pour l'art. (He/She has an affinity for economy and she is passionate about art.)

Hypothesis

Expected Effect of antecedent Prominence on the Pronoun resolution of Target sentence as predicted in Expt. 2

Results

Participants : 48 students (University of Paris III)

Main effect as previously (F(1,47)=16.9, p<0.001)

No longer any Position x Pronoun Interaction (F(1,47)=0.9, p=0.34)

Prominence x Pronoun Interaction

Longer Reading for Subject in introduction x Speaker Gender Pronoun condition (F(1,47)=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-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 pronoun is the mentioned Speaker. The Speaker’s point of view signaled by the PP seems to prime opinion PP, possibly changing the narrative from an objective story about the previous Grammatical Subject to a story concerning the subjectivity of the Speaker. This study is aimed at opening a new research line concerning the understanding of the influence of verbal phrases in pronoun resolution.

Bibliography


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