Thematic information and pronominal resolution of inter-sentential subject

Sara Morgado¹, Maria Armanda Costa¹ and Gabriela Matos¹

¹University of Lisbon
contact: saramorgado@yahoo.com

Following work on co-reference in European Portuguese (Costa et al 1998, Costa 2003 and 2010), we report a task of sentence processing to test pronominal co-reference between sentence Subjects. European Portuguese being a null subject language, we tested the preference for covert vs. overt pronoun as a syntactic-semantic strategy, productive in anaphoric chains, now in untested conditions.

Referring to the Theory of Accessibility, (Ariel, 1990, 1994) and the Theory of the Antecedent Position, (Carminati, 2002), we created the conditions in (1) and (2). We used pairs of simple sentences in juxtaposition, where the pronominal Subject in the second sentence is ambiguous: it can either retrieve the Subject or the Direct Object of the previous sentence. Against results obtained in European Portuguese in complex sentences, we wanted to verify if Subject prominence holds out of intra-sentential domain. Moreover, choosing agentive and perceptive verbs and active and passive sentences, we tested semantic properties of the Subject with divergent thematic roles, given the Theory of Thematic Hierarchy (Grimshaw, 1991): in (1a) the Subject of the first sentence is Agent and in (1b) it is Theme; in (2a) it is a perceptive Experiencer, while in (2b) it is Theme.

We intended to verify:

(i) If covert pronouns are preferred to retrieve the Subject of the first sentence;
(ii) If thematic roles influence semantic prominence of the Subject of the first sentence.

Twenty-four informants read a sequential task (PsyScope programme) and chose the antecedent of the subject in the second sentence (the two antecedents, Subject and Direct Object appeared on the screen). We registered the time (in milliseconds) in choosing the antecedent and the choice (Subject /Direct Object).

The results show a significant preference for retrieving the Subject (71%), regardless of type of pronoun, and thematic role of the antecedent, and lower decision times for retrieving the Subject (1755ms) than the Direct Object (2055ms). Moreover, the condition null pronoun for Subject/Agent antecedent had slower decision times than the one with overt pronoun, both in active (1817ms vs 1470ms) and passive sentences (2107ms vs 1918ms), thus contradicting the Avoid Pronoun Principle (Chomsky, 1981; Brito, 1991), as well as results for intra-sentential pronoun resolution, in European Portuguese, Italian and Spanish. It seems that the overt pronoun, and not the covert one, is the preferred option for retrieving a high salient antecedent in a discursive context.

Also, although we didn’t find significant differences between retrieving an Agent Subject (1693ms) and a Theme Subject (1909ms), we did find them between retrieving a Theme Object (1856ms.) and a Passive Complement (2375ms.). More importantly, an Agent Passive Complement induces higher decision times (2247ms.) than an Experiencer one (2205ms.), which cannot be attributed to syntactic information but rather to semantic information.

We conclude that semantic information is important in pronoun resolution: a salient semantic constituent, the Agent, induces lower decision times in a prominent syntactic position and higher decision times in a non-prominent syntactic position.
Examples:

(1a) O Samuel Agent agrediu o Bruno no pavilhão. Horas mais tarde, Ø/ele discutiu o assunto com preocupação.
Samuel hit Bruno in the pavilion. Hours later, Ø/ he discussed the matter with concern.

(1b) O Samuel Theme foi agredido pelo Bruno no pavilhão. Horas mais tarde, Ø/ele discutiu o assunto com preocupação.
Samuel was hit by Bruno in the pavilion. Hours later, Ø/ he discussed the matter with concern.

(2a) O Júlio Experiencer ouviu o Tobias na loja.
No dia seguinte, Ø/ele arrumou as estantes.
Júlio heard Tobias at the store. The following day, Ø/he tidied the shelves.

(2b) O Júlio Theme foi ouvido pelo Tobias na loja.
No dia seguinte, Ø/ele arrumou as estantes.
Júlio was heard by Tobias at the store. The following day, Ø/he tidied the shelves.

Results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>condition</th>
<th>SN1: decision times in ms.</th>
<th>% answers</th>
<th>condition</th>
<th>SN2: decision times in ms.</th>
<th>% answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SU/AG_Cov P</td>
<td>1817</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>DO/TE_Cov P</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU/AG_Ov P</td>
<td>1470</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>DO/TE_Ov P</td>
<td>2080</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU/EX_Cov P</td>
<td>1518</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>DO/TP_Cov P</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU/EX_Ov P</td>
<td>1655</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>DO/TP_Ov P</td>
<td>1736</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU/TE_Cov P</td>
<td>2107</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>CP/AG_Cov P</td>
<td>2380</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU/TE_Ov P</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>CP/AG_Ov P</td>
<td>2059</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU/TP_Cov P</td>
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<td>74.2</td>
<td>CP/EX_Cov P</td>
<td>2108</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU/TP_Ov P</td>
<td>1780</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>CP/EX_Ov P</td>
<td>2277</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>1755</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>Means</td>
<td>2055</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References:
Carminati, Maria Nella (2002), The processing of Italian subject pronouns. PhD.

1 Cov P – retrieval by covert pronoun Ov P – retrieval by overt pronoun
SU/TE – Theme subject SU/TP – Theme subject of perceptive verb
DO/TE – Theme direct object DO/TP – Theme direct object of perceptive verb
CP/AG – Agent passive complement CP/EX – Experiencer passive complement