In French, a referent can be modified by a subordinate clause containing an overt pronoun as in (1a), or, alternatively, by a nonfinite adverbial clause that does not contain an overt pronoun but a zero anaphor as in (1b). For ambiguous overt pronouns such as in (1a), previous research in different languages has found that pragmatic factors such as the topicality of the antecedents influence to which of the two potential antecedents the pronoun is resolved (see e.g. Arnold, 1998). In contrast, it is not clear whether pragmatic factors also influence the resolution of zero anaphora as in (1b). According to prescriptive grammar, such zero anaphora should always be resolved towards the syntactic subject of the matrix clause in French, even though following native speakers’ intuitions, resolution towards the object of the matrix clause seems possible as well. The relative influence of pragmatic cues (topicality) and syntactic cues (subjecthood) for the two types of anaphora were tested in a written questionnaire containing four types of sentences: canonical active SVO sentences (1a,b), sentences with a dislocated subject (2a,b), passive SVO sentences (3a,b), and sentences with a dislocated object (4a,b). The percentages of choices for the first noun (N1) as the antecedent of the anaphor are in brackets.

(1a) Pierre a giflé Jean quand il était jeune. (58%)  
(1b) Pierre a giflé Jean Ø étant jeune. (62%)  
Peter slapped John when he was/ being young.

(2a) Pierre, il a giflé Jean quand il était jeune. (60%)  
(2b) Pierre, il a giflé Jean Ø étant jeune. (64%)  
Peter, he slapped John when he was/ being young.

(3a) Pierre a été giflé par Jean quand il était jeune. (84%)  
(3b) Pierre a été giflé par Jean Ø étant jeune. (63%)  
Peter has been slapped by John when he was/ being young.

(4a) Pierre, Jean l’a giflé quand il était jeune. (72%)  
(4b) Pierre, Jean l’a giflé Ø étant jeune. (46%)  
Peter, John slapped him when he was/being young.

For sentences with an overt anaphor (1a-4a), an N1-preference was found for all four constructions. This preference was significantly more pronounced in passive sentences (3a) as well as in sentences with a left-dislocated object (4a) than in active sentences (1a) and sentences with a left dislocated subject (2a) (F1(1,60)=18.48, p<.0001; F2(1,11)=9.03, p<.05), and significantly more pronounced in passives (3a) than in sentences with a left-dislocated object (4a) (F1(1,60)=4.78, p<.05; F2(1,11)=4.31). These results are neither compatible with a syntactic role preference nor with a general preference for dislocated topics (no effect of topicalisation for dislocated subjects). It seems that patient-initial structures such as (3a) and (4a), which deviate from the canonical agent-initial order, constitute a strong case of foregrounding the patient of the sentence. If we assume that the choice of the subject can be considered as a means of topicalisation as well (see e.g. Demuth, 1990), passivation may be used only when the patient is supposed to be clearly marked as the topic of the sentence. Passivation, less frequent in French than dislocation, may thus be a particular strong and more easily perceived marker of topicality. Overall, the increased N1-preference in
conditions (3a) and (4a) therefore suggests that the pronoun is resolved towards a strongly marked sentence topic for overt pronouns. For zero anaphora, approximately 59% of the interpretations were in favour of the syntactic subject across conditions, suggesting that syntactic role is the predominant factor that determines resolution preferences for zero anaphora in French, whereas topicalisation does not seem to play a role. Note, however, that this preference is far from being a case of the application of a prescriptive rule, as object-interpretations turned out to be possible as well in a large number of cases. We conclude that pragmatic factors play a bigger role for the resolution of overt pronouns, and syntactic factors for the resolution of zero anaphora.

References: