Language specific preferences in pronoun resolution: Evidence from French, Spanish and German

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Introduction

Regarding the choice of the antecedent of a pronoun in ambiguous cases as “Peter hit John when he…”, a cross-linguistic difference between German and French has been reported: There is a preference to bind the pronoun to the first-mentioned referent in German while a preference for the second-mentioned referent was observed in French (Hemforth & al., 2005).

One factor contributing to this difference might be language-specific marking of information structure (IS). Filling the first position is a stronger indicator of topicality in German than in a rigid word order language as French, and pronouns have been suggested to be preferentially bound to the topic. This might explain why a pronoun is bound to the referent in first position in German but not necessarily in French.

The Rationale of the Present Study

The aim was to further investigate how the way information status is typically marked in different languages influences pronoun resolution.

To explore the influence of IS marking, we tested interpretation preferences in written questionnaires comparing closely matched constructions in French, German and Spanish. Contrary to German, in French, IS distinctions are expressed by specific syntactic constructions rather than by word order alone. In Spanish, word order is more flexible (compared to French) and IS is mainly expressed through word order variation.

General Method and Conditions

We established interpretational preferences, applying a cloze task, where participants (64 French, 33 German and 55 Colombian Spanish native speakers) had to fill the gap in constructions like “… student was young”.

The French and the Spanish questionnaires included 4 conditions: N1 was subject and topic (1, baseline condition), object and topic (2), subject and focus (3) or object and focus (4). The influence of grammatical role was thus tested independent of the information structural status. Only conditions (1) and (2) were present in the German questionnaire.

Results and discussion

The results confirm the previous cross-linguistic difference observed: In German, the ambiguous pronoun is preferentially bound to N1 (62.8%, t(32)=3.23, p<.05; t(26)=6.13, p<.0001) while it is preferentially bound to N2 in French (56.4%, t(63)=3.35, p<.001; t(27)=6.3, p<.0001).

In Spanish, the baseline condition (1) revealed a preference for N1 (59%, t(55)=2.27, p<.05; t(25)=2, p<.05) as in German. Nevertheless, as in French, the pronoun was significantly more often bound to the topic than to the focus (respectively for French and Spanish: F1(1,60)=21.6, p<.0001; F2(1,27)=13.9, p<.001; F1(1,50)=14.848, p<.0001; F2(1,27)=12.965, p<.001) and no main effect of the grammatical role of N1 was observed (all Fs<1).

On the other hand, in German, the preference for N1 was significantly reduced when it was a topicalised object (F1(1,30)=6.97, p<.05; F2(1,26)=6.086, p<.05) although it was still a more accessible antecedent than the object in the baseline condition (56.2% vs. 30.6%, F1(1,32)=10.83, p<.001; F2(1,26)=37.56, p<.001).

Overall, results showed that the influence of grammatical role is language specific, whereas IS marking tends to have a language independent effect:

- Focusing a referent blocks the binding of the pronoun in French as well as in Spanish.
- Topicalising an object has the same effect in the three languages. Indeed, the cross-linguistic differences tend to disappear in topic-marking dislocation structures as (2).

Reference