The effect of NP type on the processing of French focus constructions

This paper is concerned with the role of the French focus-marking *c'est* cleft in facilitating the processing of focal information. We concentrate specifically on differences in processing between clefted subject and clefted object NPs. Previous work has argued that focus in French is mainly marked by clefts. Lambrecht (2001) further claims that canonical subjects are associated with a heavy cognitive load — thus dispreferred — but this constraint is not as robust for object NPs, which tend to appear *in situ*. When focalized, subjects are therefore more frequently clefted than objects. Psycholinguistic studies of English have found that (1) words bearing a pitch accent (the strategy used to signal focus) are identified faster and recalled more accurately than non-accented ones (Cutler and Fodor, 1979; Bean et al., 1989; Birch and Garnsey, 1995) and (2) comprehension times are longer for sentences lacking a felicitous pitch accent (Bock and Mazzella, 1983). Hupet and Tilmant (1986) found similar results for French: The presence of *c'est* clefts speeds comprehension time, but only in contexts where the clefts are licensed by the interlocutors' belief states. We conducted three experiments addressing the following research questions: In French, how do canonical sentences compare to *c'est*-cleft sentences with regards to the speed of comprehension and processing of focal information? And, given Lambrecht's (2001) claim that clefted subjects are more frequent than clefted objects, are clefted subjects associated with faster comprehension times than clefted objects? We present results suggesting that the *c'est* cleft construction facilitates the processing of focal information in French, and does so equally for subject and object clefts.

In Experiments 1 and 2, native French speakers were visually presented with stimuli containing (i) a brief context describing a scenario with several participants, then (ii) a question about the identity of one of the participants from the context, and finally (iii) a target sentence identifying one of the participants as the answer to the question under discussion (see Appendix). Reaction times were analyzed from a truth-value judgment task, in which subjects pressed a response button as soon as they knew whether the target focus constituent referred to the congruent participant or not. There were three conditions for the target sentence. In the control condition, the target sentence contained felicitous use of a focus-marking construction (a *c'est* cleft). In the canonical condition, the target sentence was a canonical SVO sentence with no explicit focus marking. For the clash condition, the target sentence infelicitously contained a right dislocation (an NP at the right periphery of the clause); this construction is principally used to mark topic, not focus. In Experiment 2, stimuli contained clefted subjects and objects, thus manipulating the grammatical function of the focus NP as a variable. Preliminary results will also be presented from Experiment 3 (currently underway), which uses the same experimental items in a self-paced reading task to provide reading time data as a secondary metric of processing speed for subject versus object clefted NPs.

In Experiments 1 and 2, canonical sentences had the highest reaction times. Reaction times for sentences explicitly marked for focus (whether felicitous or infelicitous) were lower, with control sentences having the fastest reaction times. Surprisingly, no significant difference was found in reaction times between subject and object clefts, despite Lambrecht's (2001) finding that subject clefts are more frequent than object clefts in French. Our results support previous findings that explicit focus marking facilitates processing, and suggest that sentences with focus marked via word order in French are associated with faster processing than canonical sentences.

Appendix

(i) Context:

Un boucher, un chef et un boulanger sont dans la cuisine dun grand restaurant. Ils voulaient tous que tout soit parfait, mais il y a que le chef qui a eu le temps de goûter la soupe.
'A butcher, a chef and a baker were in the kitchen of a big restaurant. They all wanted everything to be perfect, but the chef was the only who had time to taste the soup.'

(ii) Question:

Qui c'est qui a goûté la soupe? 'Who tasted the soup?'

(iii) Answers:

Control: C'est le chef qui a goûté la soupe. 'The CHEF tasted the soup.'
Canonical: Le chef a goûté la soupe. 'The CHEF tasted the soup.'
Clash: Il a goûté la soupe, le chef. 'The chef tasted the SOUP.'

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