Pronoun resolution is the process of identifying the antecedent of the pronoun in the discourse context.

More than one possible compatible antecedent - the pronoun becomes ambiguous.

Factors influencing ambiguous pronoun resolution:
- form of the anaphoric expression (null vs. overt pronoun)
- syntactic role of the antecedents (subject, object)
- [+/- definiteness] of the antecedents

Previous studies on adults:
- The reduced form (null) prefers a salient antecedent (subject, first mention, topic). (Carminati, 2002, Tsimpli et al., 2004)
- The strong form (overt) prefers a less salient antecedent (object, non-topic) as it indicates topic shift. (Grimshaw & Samek-Lodovici, 1998; Tsimpli et al., 2004)
- An indefinite antecedent in subject position weakens the topicality of the subject making it harder to process than a definite one. (Gibson, 1998)

The present study: investigates how null/ overt ambiguous pronouns interact with definiteness of the subject and object antecedents in the process of pronominal resolution.

Participants: Two groups of 20 typically developing Greek-speaking children:
- 6-8 years old (9 females, Mean: 7.1 (range: 6.2-8.0), SD: 0.5)
- 9-11 years old (12 females, Mean: 9.7 (range: 9.0-11.0), SD: 0.5)

Task:: on line self-paced listening task with picture selection (Papadopoulou, Tsimpli & Amvrazis, 2014)

4 CONDITIONS:
- The secretary was helping a nurse when she slowly was writing a letter. Definite Subject - Indefinite Object - Null pronoun
- The secretary was helping the nurse when she slowly was writing a letter. Definite Subject - Definite Object - Null pronoun
- The secretary was helping a nurse when she slowly was writing a letter. Definite Subject - Indefinite Object - Overt pronoun
- A secretary was helping the nurse when she slowly was writing a letter. Indefinite Subject - Definite Object - Overt pronoun

Measures: - Reaction times while listening the sentence (on-line)
- Response time (off-line)
- Referent choice (off-line)

Hypotheses:
- The null form will prefer a topic antecedent -> Subject
- The overt pronoun will provoke a topic shift from subject to object resulting in Object preference for antecedent.
- The indefinite antecedent in subject position will trigger processing and/or preference choice since it is not the default option

Research Questions
- How will definiteness interact with the processing and the interpretation of the anaphoric forms (null vs. overt)
- Whether the two age groups will be differentiated among conditions

Aims

On-line listening times

Listening times in the Null cond. for both age groups

Listening times in the Overt cond. for both age groups

1st segment: both age groups needed significant more time to process

Indef_Def vs. Def_Indef among the null (F(1)= 5.37, p=.02) and the overt condition (F(1)=11.22, p=.02)

Response Time - no effect of definiteness on Response Time in either condition

Referent choice (Subject- Object- Other)

NULL

OVERT

- Null Indef_Def: Referent x Group (F(2) = 5.74, p=.004)

Younger participants showed a greater preference for the Object antecedent than older participants (t (38) = 2.07, p=.045)

- Overt Def_Indef: Both groups preferred Object antecedent (F(2)=54.3, p=.001)

- Overt Indef_Def - Both groups preferred Object antecedent

F(2)=39.0 , p=.001), Referent x Group F (2) =5.55, p=.005

Conclusion

- Children are sensitive from an early age to the default Subject= Topic= def DP option
- Older group: demonstrated sensitivity to the pronominal form (behaving in an adult way) rather than to the definiteness of the antecedents.
- Older group: Topic shift resulting from the Indef_Def condition further enhanced the preference for the Object antecedent.
- Younger group: distributional properties of the null / overt pronouns are not fully specified yet. Object antecedent preference seems to be affected by the (in)definiteness specification of the arguments.

References


