1. Introduction

- Null vs. Overt: Null pronouns tend to refer to more prominent antecedents than overt pronouns (e.g., Givon, 1983; Ariel 1990).
- Subjecthood: Null pronouns refer to subjects which are syntactically prominent while overt pronouns refer to non-subject entities (e.g., Italian, Carminati, 2002).
- Topichood: Overt pronouns in pre-verbal position refer to subjects which are also topics (e.g. Alonso-Ovalle et al., 2002, Kehler and Rohde, 2013).
- Pro-drop vs. Topic-drop languages: commonly assumed dichotomy may be misleading because subjecthood and topichood seem to contribute to null pronouns in both language types.

2. Research Questions

- Is the interpretation of null and overt pronouns in Vietnamese affected by subjecthood and/or topichood? Are null and overt pronouns equally sensitive to grammatical role and topichood?

3. Current study

Native speakers of Vietnamese (n=24) participated in a written sentence completion task. We manipulated (i) form of pronoun prompt (null/overt), and (ii) voice (active/passive) of first clause.

- Being the subject of a passive: A stronger indicator of topichood than the subject of an active clause? (e.g. Kehler & Rohde, 2013)
- Vietnamese: Two kinds of passive: ví vs. duc (neg. vs. post connotation, patterned alike in our study)
- We controlled mutual coherence effects: Connective vì ‘because’ in all targets
- Twenty-four equi-biased IC verbs (adapted from Hartshorne & Snedeker, 2013).

4. Results

- The rate of subject continuations shows a main effect of voice (p<0.01, mixed-effects regression used for analysis), marginal effect of pronoun form (p=.087) and a marginal interaction (p=.052).

| Active | Ong kí sự cảm ơn ông lái xe vi ông ấy / đã ... male engineer thank male driver because he / PAST “The engineer thanked the driver because he / PAST...”
|--------|----------------------------------|
| Passive | Ong kí sự duc ông lái xe cảm ơn vi ông ấy / đã ... male engineer PASS male driver thank because he / PAST “The engineer was thanked by the driver because he / PAST...”

(In null-pronoun condition, past-tense morpheme signaled presence of null pronoun. We also had a no-prompt condition)

3. Predictions

Following the assumption that null pronouns refer to more salient referents than overt pronouns:

- If only antecedent’s grammatical role matters: Null pronouns interpreted as referring to subjects more often than overt pronouns.
- If only antecedent’s topichood matters ( & subjects of passives are more topical than subjects of actives): Null pronouns interpreted as referring to subjects more often than overt pronouns
- If both grammatical role and topichood matter: Null pronouns strongly prefer subjects of passives

5. Conclusions

- #1 How to explain object bias in actives and subject bias in passives? Bias for theme/patient!
- Both forms prefer theme antecedents, but more so with passives than actives (p<.05) => Subject bias with passives is stronger than object bias with actives.
- Our production work with same verbs (not reported here) shows these verbs are equi-biased with overall equal likelihood of subject vs. object continuation.
- #2 Overt vs. null distinction matters in active but not in passive: Goes against accounts that assign fully complementary referential behavior to overt and null pronouns.
- Division of labor between null and overt pronouns is less clear than standardly assumed (see also Kaiser & Trueswell, 2008).
- No signs of overall subject preference with nulls (or overts), contrary to claims for Italian or Spanish.
- We do see signs of a topichood preference (theme preference stronger with passives than actives).

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Does grammatical subjecthood matter at all for pronoun interpretation in Vietnamese?
- Is the theme preference merely a result of the connective vì ‘because’?
- Would implicit causative verbs (e.g. thích ‘like’) be better choices to investigate subjecthood effect?

REFERENCES


