

Investigating Salience in Complex Sentences: A Look at Relative Clauses

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It is common ground that pronominal forms are used for reference to highly salient entities (Clark & Sengul 1979, Givon 1983, Gundel et al 1993, Grosz et al 1995, Ariel 2001). It is also widely accepted that entity salience may be affected by a number of factors (Arnold et al 2000, Kaiser & Trueswell 2003, Stevenson et al 2000). Two such factors that have been discussed in the literature are subjecthood and recency. In free word order languages such as Finnish it has been shown that the relationship between entity and choice of referring expression might be more complex than currently assumed (Kaiser & Trueswell, to appear). In this presentation, I investigate the salience status of referents of subjects in complex sentences. Following up on earlier work (Miltsakaki 2003, 2004) on entity salience in main and adverbial clauses, here, I present data addressing the question of entity salience in main and relative clauses. I will discuss data from two studies: a corpus study on entity salience in main and relative clauses and a recent experiment on subject salience in different types of relative clauses. Specifically, I compare subject salience of non-restrictive relative clauses, restrictive with an indefinite head noun and restrictive with a definite head noun.

In the corpus study, I coded 300 relative clauses for a) the grammatical role of the head noun in the main and relative clause, b) the frequency of reference to entities evoked in the relative clause, and c) type of referring expression. Entities introduced in the main clause were more likely to be referenced in the subsequent discourse than entities introduced in relative clause. Only 25% of entities evoked in a relative clause were subsequently referenced of which only 2% was referenced with a pronoun. Regarding, recency, pronominal forms are often picked as their antecedent the referent of the subject of the main clause even when a more recent potential antecedent was evoked in the subject position of a relative clause.

Relative clauses, however, are associated with different semantic and discourse properties depending on their type (Prince 1995). I addressed this question in a sentence completion study. Sample critical items are shown below.

- (1) Samantha met Jennifer who played in 'Friends'. She...
- (2) Matthew adopted a boy who lost his family in the civil war. He...
- (3) The professor collaborated with the guy who was hired last month. He...

Preliminary results from 15 participants suggest that, in the absence of a larger context, the referents of subjects of main clauses are overall preferred as antecedents of the pronominal form. Non-restrictive relative clauses, (1), though, and restrictive relative clauses with an indefinite head noun, (2), pattern alike in that their subject referents are more likely to be picked up as antecedents of the pronoun than the subject referents of the restrictive relative clauses with a definite head noun, (3).