

Competition-driven animacy mismatches in anaphoric relations

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Background. The complement position of French and Spanish prepositions can be filled by different types of pronouns, including strong pronouns (1a) and null pronouns (1b) (Zribi-Hertz, 1984).

- (1) a. **Cette dame**_i, je voyage toujours avec **elle**_i. French
 'This lady, I always travel with her'
 b. **Cette valise**_i, je voyage toujours avec **Ø**_i.
 'This suitcase, I always travel with (it)'

Empirical studies have shown that the choice between strong and null pronouns in French PPs depends on the animacy feature of the antecedent: human antecedents prefer a strong pronoun (in 1a, *dame-elle*) and inanimate antecedents a null pronoun (in 1b, *valise-Ø*) (Danell, 1973; Heidinger, 2019, 2023, 2024; Poplack et al., 2012; Shimanskaya, 2018). This can be represented as the default mapping in (2).

- (2) a. ANTECEDENT_{+human} ↔ PRONOUN_{strong}
 b. ANTECEDENT_{-animate} ↔ PRONOUN_{null}

However, mismatches, i.e., deviations from (2), are attested in French. In this talk we focus on one particular mismatch, which has been described as predictable in Zribi-Hertz (2000): strong pronouns can have inanimate antecedents whenever the null pronoun is not unavailable (cf. (3), for the French preposition *par* 'for', which does not allow for null pronouns). This suggests that the availability of a null pronoun (as a competitor to the strong pronoun) plays a crucial role in the potential antecedents of strong pronouns.

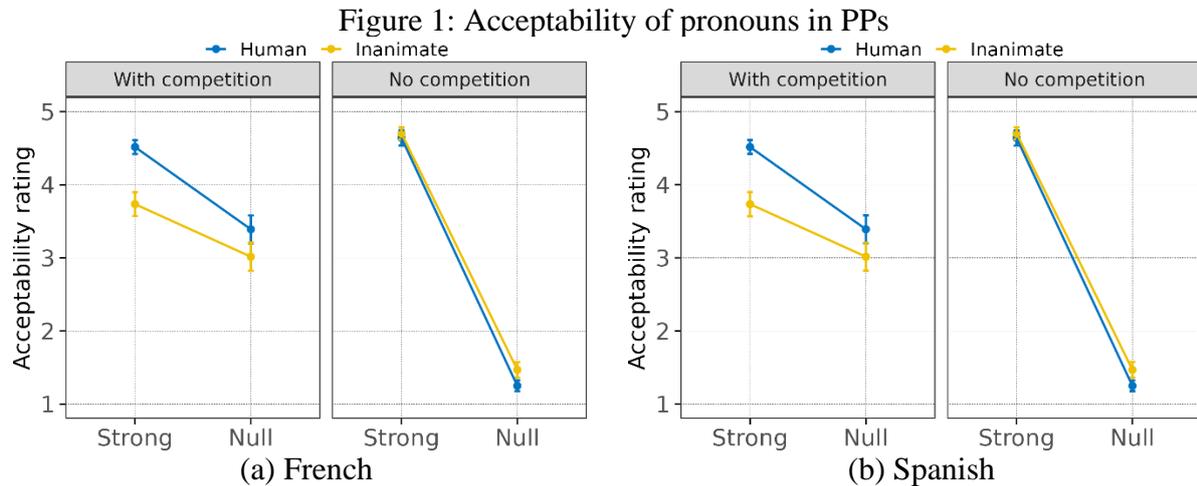
- (3) **Ce pays**_i, j'ai toujours été attiré par {**lui**_i/***Ø**_i}. French
 'This country, I've always been attracted to {him/*Ø}'
 (Zribi-Hertz 2000: 674)

We consider the animacy restrictions on the antecedents of strong pronouns to result from a competition effect, following Müller & Sternefeld's (2001) notion of competition: the acceptability of a linguistic form F_i (sentence, word, etc.) does not result from the properties of that form F_i alone, but also depends on the properties of other forms F_j , F_k etc. In the present case, the animacy restriction on the antecedents of strong pronouns depends on the availability of null pronouns.

The **goal of this talk** is to scrutinize the role of competition for animacy mismatches in anaphoric relations by considering the following two aspects: (i) novel empirical evidence for competition effects in both French and Spanish, (ii) theoretical implications of competition effects as concerns a) the exact type of competition involved and b) the animacy features to be assumed for null and strong pronouns. We show that although the antecedent's animacy has a strong impact on pronoun choice, it is necessary to take into account the (un)availability of the null pronoun to understand the licensing of strong pronouns.

Empirical evidence for competition effects. We conducted online acceptability judgment experiments for French and Spanish. We created 16 items in each language following a 2*2 design (animacy: human vs. inanimate; pronoun: strong vs. null). Half of the items contained prepositions which allow null pronouns (French *avec* 'with', *sans* 'without'; Spanish *delante* 'in front', *detrás* 'behind') and the other half contained prepositions which do not allow null pronouns (French *malgré* 'despite', *vers* 'towards'; Spanish *con* 'with', *sin* 'without'). For each language, we recruited 32 participants (from France and Spain).

The results are displayed in Figures 1a and 1b. The acceptability of the null pronoun depends on the language: while in Spanish it is at most mildly acceptable, independently of animacy, in French, it is fully acceptable with inanimate antecedents only. Despite this difference, in both languages, the (un)availability of a null pronoun has the same competition effect on the animacy restrictions of strong pronouns. Whenever the null pronoun is not available, strong pronouns show no animacy restrictions: they are acceptable with both human and inanimate antecedents. When the null pronoun is available, strong pronouns show the following animacy restriction: they are more acceptable with human than with inanimate antecedents.



Theoretical implications of competition effects. Blocking is the most frequently discussed manifestation of competition. In this case, the availability of F_j blocks F_i ; e.g., *hotter* blocks **more hot*. There is, however, another subtype of competition, namely where the unavailability of F_j boosts F_i ; e.g., the use of French pronoun *me* '1.sg' in reflexive and non-reflexive contexts given the absence of a dedicated reflexive pronoun (we label this type *boosting*). We will argue that in the present context the type of competition effect (blocking vs. boosting) depends on which animacy features are assumed for strong and null pronouns (if any). Based on a Stochastic OT analysis (Boersma & Hayes, 2001) we assume that neither strong nor null pronouns are specified with respect to animacy. The observed competition effect then emerges from an interaction between two constraints. While an economy principle requires the use of a null pronoun whenever available, an outranking faithfulness constraint requires referents with semantic gender (= human) to be expressed by gender-marked forms (i.e., strong and not null pronouns). It follows that strong pronouns are restricted to human antecedents only when a null pronoun is available.

Selected references

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