

# THE INFLUENCE OF TOPICALITY ON INTERPRETATION OF NULL AND OVERT PRONOUNS IN MANDARIN

Wen Cui (The University of Hong Kong), Heeju Hwang (The University of Hong Kong)  
wendycui@connect.hku.hk

Previous research suggests that pronoun interpretation is related to the mental accessibility of its antecedent. According to the accessibility hierarchy (Ariel, 2001), more reduced forms tend to co-refer with accessible referents. It is widely assumed that grammatical role and topicality are the two factors that affect the accessibility of the referents. It is well established that grammatical role affects pronoun interpretation across languages. For example, in English overt pronouns are more likely to refer to subjects than objects. In Mandarin, both null and overt pronouns are subject-biased but null pronouns have a stronger preference for subjects.

However, it is not clear how topicality affects interpretation of different types of referring expressions. Through passivization, Kehler and Rohde (2013) demonstrated that English pronouns tend to be interpreted as referring to topical antecedents. Yet no agreement has been reached on how topicality affects interpretation of null and overt pronouns in languages with both pronouns. On one hand, Ueno & Kehler (2016) found that only overt pronouns are sensitive to topicality in Japanese. On the other hand, Ngo (2019) found that only null pronouns showed sensitivity to topicality in Vietnamese. But Kim et al. (2013) did not find any evidence that null and overt pronoun interpretation are sensitive to topicality in Korean.

To clarify mixed findings in the literature, the current study investigated how topicality influenced the interpretation of null and overt pronouns in Mandarin. Mandarin provides a good testing ground for studying the influence of topicality on null and overt pronouns for several reasons. First, unlike in Japanese and Korean, both null and overt pronouns in Mandarin are commonly used. Second, unlike in Vietnamese, overt pronouns in Mandarin are function words and are not used for other meanings (i.e., kinship relations).

We manipulated topicality using a left-dislocation structure in (1).

(1) a. non-topical:

因为小明打了小李，所以...

‘Because Xiaoming beat Xiaoli, so...’

b. topical

小明因为打了小李，所以...

‘Xiaoming because beat Xiaoli, so..’

When the subject is fronted as in (1b), it is considered more topical. To see how topicality affects the interpretation of overt and null pronouns, non-topical and topical prompts were followed by either 就 “Ø then” or 他就 “he/she then” The adverb 就 ‘then’ always occurs following the subject and before a predicate. When no explicit pronouns are present before 就, it signals the presence of a null pronoun.

Using Latin Square design, we constructed four lists. Participants (N= 58) were randomly assigned to one of the four lists. They were asked to provide natural continuations to prompt sentences. We analyzed subject and object reference as a function of topicality and pronoun prompt using mixed-effect binomial logistic regression models. We found significant effects of topicality and prompt type. Topicality increased subject reference in topical condition (89.5%) compared to the non-topical condition (75.7%) ( $p < .001$ ). Null pronouns were more subject-biased than overt pronouns (86.5% vs 71.7%) ( $p < .001$ ). There was no interaction between topicality and pronoun types. These results suggest that both null and overt

pronouns are more likely to refer to the subject in the topical condition than non-topical condition, and null pronouns have a stronger preference for subject antecedents.