

Connectives and clause order modulate Chinese pronoun resolution

Shuya Chen

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Patrick Sturt

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Vicky Chondrogianni

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Abstract

While Chinese null pronouns consistently demonstrate a subject preference, overt pronouns exhibit a subject preference in forward reference but not in backward reference. Previous studies have attributed this pattern to syntactically imposed constraints. However, Su (2020) proposed that this pattern arises from language-specific discourse constraints prohibiting subject referents for overt backward pronouns in temporal clauses but allowing them in non-temporal clauses. To examine Su's account, we administered an offline sentence judgment experiment with 100 Chinese-speaking adults. The experiment employed contextually ambiguous sentences, involving manipulations of pronoun form (null vs. overt), anaphora type (forward vs. backward) and clause/connective (desihou 'when', zhiqian/zhihou 'before/after' and ruguo 'if'). Our results partly confirmed Su's account: Chinese overt backward pronouns showed a subject preference in non-temporal ruguo 'if' clauses and temporal zhiqian/zhihou 'before/after' clauses, but not in temporal desihou 'when' clauses. These findings suggest potential influences of event structure on Chinese pronoun resolution.