Learning left-dislocation in French: between pragmatics and sociolinguistics

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Our research concerns the learning of French left-dislocation [1] by advanced learners. This construction has been analyzed as marking contrastive topics. It is highly productive in spoken French and in so-called "non-standard" French varieties. Acceptability judgment tests on native speakers confirmed higher acceptability of left-dislocations in contrastive topic contexts versus corrective focus contexts and the predictable inverse pattern for cleft constructions [2]. Left-dislocations were, however, systematically less acceptable when compared to more "standard" constructions (clefts) in the same contexts.

[1] Le capitaine, je l’ai félicité.

[2] C’est le capitaine que j’ai félicité.

Corpus studies show that advanced learners have few problems learning the relevant discursive context (Donaldson, 2011). Pragmatic constraints seem even to be applied more easily than e.g. syntactic constraints (Clahsen & Felser, 2006). Mougeon, Nadasdi & Rehner (2002) observed, however, that non-standard French constructions are less used than their standard counterparts, so that learners may have less experience with left-dislocations. In this paper, we test the effects of pragmatics and sociolinguistic variation by replicating our experiment with advanced French learners of varying language backgrounds (Mandarin, Russian, Dutch, Czech).

Our results show a significant interaction of construction and context (p < .05) similar to the results of native speakers, but no effect of construction (p > 0.10). Learners did not judge the "non-standard" left-dislocations less acceptable than the more standard clefts. There is also no effect of the different native languages of the learners (p > 0.50). This outcome is coherent with the good acquisition of pragmatics factors but less so for sociolinguistics factors.

References

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