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Complement order**

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# The role of conceptual accessibility on word order alternations in French: Evidence from sentence recall

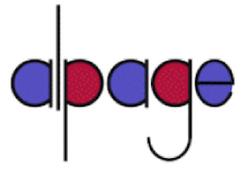


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## Complement order

► The complements of French ditransitive verbs can occur in either DO < IO or IO < DO order.

- (1) Pierre a donné [une fleur]<sub>NP</sub> [à Sophie]<sub>PP</sub>
- (2) Pierre a donné [à Sophie]<sub>PP</sub> [une fleur]<sub>NP</sub>

► Previous work in theoretical linguistics has proposed a general preference for DO < IO order (Blinkenberg 1928, Berredonner 1987), as well as several factors influencing the order of complements, including:

- Weight (short < long): (Blinkenberg 1928, Berredonner 1987, Abeillé and Godard 2004, 2006)
- Definiteness (definite < indefinite) (Berredonner 1987)
- Discourse status (given < new) (Berredonner 1987)
- Lexical semantics of the verb (Schmitt 1987)

► However, a quantitative corpus analysis using written (*French Treebank* and *Est-Républicain*) and spoken (*C-ORAL-ROM* and *ESTER*) corpora only revealed a significant role for length in determining order (Thuilier 2012).

► The preference for DO to precede IO was supported (70.4% of corpus examples were NP-PP).

## Sentence production and animacy

**Conceptual accessibility** (Bock and Warren, 1985): The ease with which the mental representation of some potential referent can be activated in or retrieved from memory.

► Assuming incrementality in sentence production (see e.g., Bock 1982), words that are more easily accessed from memory will tend to be produced first (Bock and Warren 1985, among others).

► **Animates** have been argued to be more conceptually accessible than inanimates, influencing the order of production (see Branigan et al. 2007).

► However, there has been a debate as to whether animacy affects a stage of production in which grammatical functions (such as subject and object) are assigned, or a stage that affects linear order of constituents.

► For Japanese, Tanaka et al. (2011) finds evidence for an effect of animacy at both levels of production.

## Sentence recall study

**Research Question:** Does animacy affect sentence production in French with respect to grammatical function assignment (e.g., subject, object), linear order, or both?

► Thuilier (2012) did not find a significant role for animacy in complement order, but this could have been due to confounds from other factors (e.g., length).

► If animacy affects linear order through conceptual accessibility, then we would expect a tendency to produce animate arguments first when other factors are controlled.

► In order to test this hypothesis, we followed others (see Branigan et al., 2007) in conducting a study of sentence recall, examining rates of order inversions as a way to detect effects of conceptual accessibility on production.

► Our method differed somewhat from previous studies in that the study phase was visual and the recall phase was spoken.

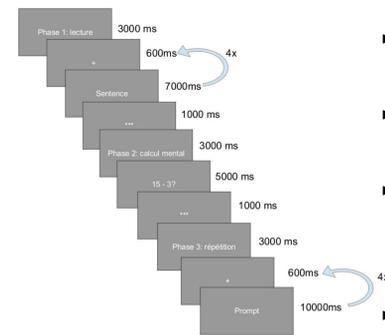
## Methods

### Materials:

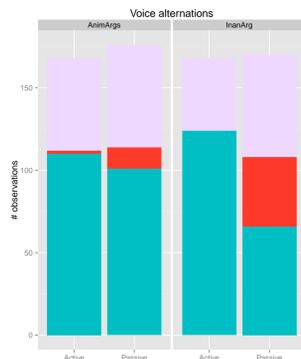
- (3) Voice alternations
  - a. Au bout de la ruelle, le policier a trouvé {le voleur/le revolver}.  
*At the end of the alley, the policeman found the thief/the revolver.*
  - b. Au bout de la ruelle, {le voleur/le revolver} a été trouvé par le policier.
- (4) Coordinations
  - a. Ce jeune homme a toujours fui les traîtres et {les lâches/les échecs}.  
*This young man has always avoided traitors and cowards/traitors and failures.*
  - b. Ce jeune homme a toujours fui {les lâches/les échecs} et les traîtres.
- (5) Ditransitives
  - a. Le chef de projet a confié {un agent commercial/un nouveau budget} à un décorateur.  
*The project manager entrusted a business agent/a new budget to a decorator.*
  - b. Le chef de projet a confié à un décorateur {un agent commercial/un nouveau budget}.

### Procedure & Coding:

- 24 blocks, each containing Study, Distractor and Recall phases.
- 2 experimental groups: Group 1 - voice alternations and Group 2 - coordinations and ditransitives.
- Responses transcribed and coded by the first two authors (second coding in progress).
- Participants with less than 30% usable data were excluded from analysis, as well as subjects and items that had zero observations in a condition.
- Analysis of the filler items (identical across groups) revealed no significant differences in overall recall rate.

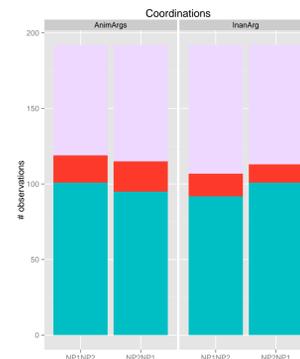


## Results



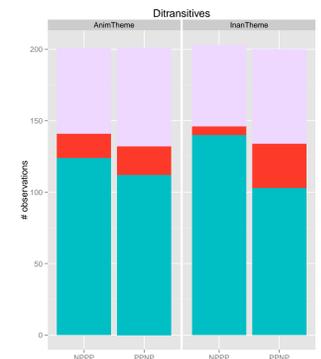
Voice alternations (31 subjects, 22 items)

- Only two inversions from active to passive, so these were left out of analyses.
- Analyzing only the passive-active inversions, we find a significant effect of animacy (Estimate = .869, SE = -.27, z = 3.22, p < .01).



Coordinations (31 subjects, 23 items)

- No significant effect of animacy on order of conjuncts.

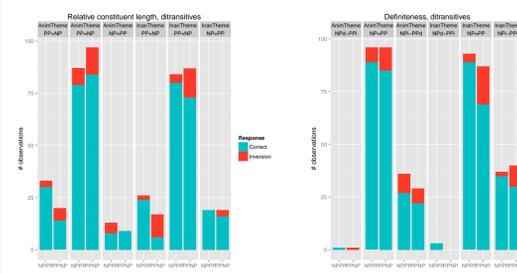


Ditransitives (33 subjects, 22 items)

- No tendency to put animate complements before inanimates.
- In fact the opposite was found, an interaction such that there were more inversions toward DO-IO order when DO was inanimate (Estimate = -0.69, SE = 0.20, z = -3.385, p < .001).

## Further analysis

- Productions were further coded for definiteness and length, which were controlled in the input sentences.
- These factors do not appear to drive the ditransitive pattern.



## Conclusions

- Replication of the animacy effect found for voice alternations in the literature (e.g., McDonald et al 1993).
- The lack of effect for coordinations is consistent with previous results (McDonald et al. 1993, Tanaka et al. 2011).
- Surprisingly, we found no animate-first preference in ditransitive complements.
- Because DOs are typically inanimate (87%, Thuilier 2012), and because DO-IO is the canonical order, we interpret our this result as suggesting **typicality with respect to grammatical function** is important: canonical arguments tend to be produced in canonical position.

## References

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