

ON THE AVAILABILITY OF THE DEFINITENESS EFFECT IN FRENCH EXISTENTIALS

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In addition to the impersonal existential expression *y avoir* ‘to be’, Modern Standard French, a non-null subject language, disposes of a great many impersonal constructions with either an inherently intransitive verb or with a transitive verb used intransitively which are usually argued to likewise express the notion of (non-)existence. These constructions are generally claimed to stand out due to the ‘Definiteness Effect’ (DE), i.e. the requirement that the postverbal DP be not definite. Yet, it proves that contrary to what is at times argued in the literature, the impersonal constructions at issue witness various exceptions to the DE, so that it is principally unclear to what extent the DE holds in Modern Standard French. What is also unclear is how the various cases of a definite postverbal DP may be accounted for.

Following Etchegoyhen & Tsoulas (1998) and Picabia (1995), I shall adopt an approach based on the information-structural properties of the postverbal DP in the impersonal constructions at issue which hence abstracts away from its actual definiteness and which hereby allows to capture all instances of a postverbal DP, regardless of its actual (in)definiteness. After reviewing two such approaches put forward in the relevant literature and showing that neither of these adequately captures all of the various cases of impersonal constructions with a definite postverbal DP, I shall look into the information-structural properties of the latter. In this connection, it will be exposed that the postverbal DP is focused. Specifically, it will be shown that whereas indefinite DPs represent instances of new information focus, definite DPs constitute contrastively focused elements. Under such an alternative approach, definite postverbal DPs will be argued to be in line with the DE, if the latter is understood in terms of a ‘Thematization Effect’, i.e. a ban on a topicalized postverbal DP.

References

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