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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 47(0)

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Publication Date

2025

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Connectives and clause order modulate Chinese pronoun resolution

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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.