French Object Relatives and subject inversion: what's your preference?

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Subject inversion in French is restricted to certain constructions (Marandin, 2011). We compare Object Relative Clauses with preverbal subjects (1) ($OR_{s_{noinv}}$) and with postverbal subjects (2) ($OR_{s_{inv}}$).

(1) l'homme que l'avocat voit_
    the man that$_{obj}$ the lawyer sees...

(2) l'homme que voit_ l'avocat
    the man that$_{obj}$ sees   the lawyer$_{subj}$

In generative grammar, such subject inversion is considered as optional and the result of verb movement (Kayne & Pollock, 1978), with higher processing costs (see Holmes & O'Regan 1981 with reversible verbs). But other studies suggest that $OR_{s_{inv}}$ depend on factors such as semantics or length (Fuchs 2006, Marandin, 2011). Using the French Treebank (newspaper), we obtained 184 OR, with 48% inversion, and annotated verb semantics, subject and verb length, number of arguments, a. o. Using logistic regression models, we found that both ORs do not differ significantly in frequency, and that $OR_{s_{inv}}$ are preferred when the subject is longer, and the verb is shorter and non agentive. Thus, $OR_{s_{noinv}}$ and $OR_{s_{inv}}$ are not alternatives but are used in specific contexts. An acceptability judgment experiment testing subject length and agentivity with materials inspired from our corpus, confirmed that with a long subject and a non agentive verb, $OR_{s_{inv}}$ are preferred. Our results are compatible with semantic accounts in RC processing (Mak et al., 2006).

References: • Holmes, O'Reagan (1981) Eye Fixation patterns during the reading of Relative-Clause sentences. JVLVB 20 417-430. • Kayne, Pollock. (1978) Stylistic inversion, successive cyclicity and move NP in French. LI 9: 595-621. • Mak, Vonk, Schriefers (2006) Animacy in processing relative clauses: The hikers that rocks crush, JML 54 466–490. • Marandin (2011) Subject Inversion in French. The Limits of Information Structure. Proc. 18th HPSG conference, CSLI Publications.