

Abstract

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**Bilingual Sentence Processing: Relative clause attachment
in English and Spanish**

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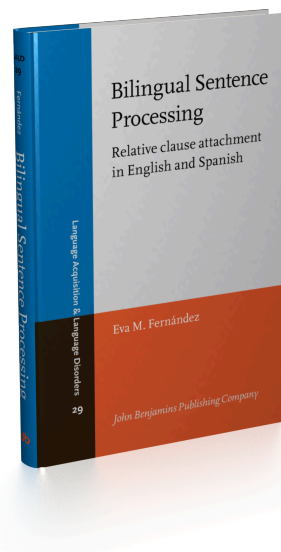
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Abstract

Monolingual studies have shown that the relative clause attachment ambiguity, illustrated by the sample English sentence below, is ultimately interpreted in different ways by speakers of English and Spanish:

- (1) Someone shot the maid of the actress that was on the balcony.

English speakers tend to attach the relative clause to the lower noun, *actress*, while in the comparable sentence in Spanish, Spanish speakers generally prefer the attachment to be to the higher noun, *maid*. This monograph compares the relative clause attachment preferences of monolingual and bilingual speakers of English and Spanish. Data were collected using a speeded self-paced reading technique, designed to reflect early processing strategies, and an unspeeded questionnaire, in which post-syntactic factors may affect subjects' behavior.

The experiments revealed that English and Spanish monolinguals behave in ways more similar than previously thought. Monolinguals exhibited a low attachment preference in early phases of processing, a preference which in later phases (as post-syntactic processes begin to operate) shifted to high attachment. The only evidence of cross-linguistic differences in the monolingual data was to be found in the unspeeded questionnaire task, where the subjects' preferences were in line with previous results: the overall preference for attachment was higher in the Spanish monolingual group than in the English monolingual group.

Bilinguals did not exhibit the same early low attachment preference as the monolinguals did in the speeded task, instead showing an overall lack of preference for one or the other attachment, reading materials in either of their languages. While this could be taken as indicative of bilinguals' not employing syntactic strategies when processing input, it is better interpreted as pointing to the sensitivity of the task itself, which differs with different reader profiles (the bilinguals were overall slower readers than the monolinguals).

In the unspeeded task, the bilingual data indicated language independent processing strategies, with bilinguals using similar strategies (those associated with monolinguals of their dominant language) with input in either language. Spanish-dominant bilinguals tend to have higher ultimate preferences, in both English and Spanish, compared to English-dominant bilinguals, whose off-line preferences are lower, in both English and Spanish.

