

Relative Clause Attachment Ambiguity Resolution in L2: the Role of Semantics

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Abstract : This study examined the effect of semantics on processing ambiguous sentences containing Relative Clauses (RCs) preceded by a complex Determiner Phrase (DP) by Persian-speaking learners of L2 English with different proficiency and Working Memory Capacities (WMCs). The semantic relationship studied was one between the subject of the main clause and one of the DPs in the complex DP to see if, as predicted by Spreading Activation Model, priming one of the DPs through this semantic manipulation affects the L2ers' preference. The results of a task using Rapid Serial Visual Processing (time-controlled paradigm) showed that manipulation of the relationship between the subject of the main clause and one of the DPs in the complex DP preceding RC has no effect on the choice of the antecedent; rather, the L2ers' processing is guided by the phrase structure information. Moreover, while proficiency did not have any effect on the participants' preferences, WMC brought about a difference in their preferences, with a DP1 preference by those with a low WMC. This finding supports the chunking hypothesis and the predicate proximity principle, which is the strategy also used by monolingual Persian speakers.

Keywords : semantics, relative clause processing, ambiguity resolution, proficiency, working memory capacity

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