Introduction and Literature Review

In the present study, the property under investigation is attachment resolution preferences in relative clauses (RCs) with ambiguities:

(1) “Maria saw the mother of the woman that was talking about cosmetics”.

To answer a comprehension question of “Who was talking about cosmetics?”, native speakers (NSs) of Russian, French, Dutch, German, Greek, and Italian prefer – “the mother” (high attachment/HA), whereas NSs of English, Norwegian, Romanian, and Swedish prefer – “the woman” (low attachment/LA) (Fodor, 1998). To start the acquisition of a new language, adult learners transfer the whole system of their L1 into the L2 (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1995). At later stages L2/L3-acquisition remains UG-constrained. Language learners demonstrate sensitivity to the TL morphology in sentence processing (Slabakova, 2000; Ionin et al., 2004; Ionin, 2006; Montrul & Slabakova, 2008; Lardiere, 2009) and show TL-like attachment resolution preferences in the L2 (Dekydtspotter, 2008, 2009; Dussias, 2003; Dussias and Sagarraga, 2007). Sensitivity to the inner structure of the L2 predicts a change of a sentence processing pattern under the influence of a new linguistic phenomenon, i.e. an event-oriented, or pseudo-relative (PR) interpretation of an RC.

(2) Maria witnessed (what?) the event that the mother of the woman was talking about cosmetics.

The PR interpretation favors HA in NSs of French, Spanish, Italian (Grillo & Costa, 2014) and English, though English preserves overall LA (Grillo & Costa, 2015). The present study deals with Russian and English. Formally these languages do not allow PRs and need a change of structure to get an even-oriented interpretation. The proposed study claims that both NSs and language learners are sensitive to the effect of the perception verb and calls it phenomenon-specific RC processing.

Research Questions

RQ1: Do NSs of Russian and English and L2-learners of Russian show different attachment resolution preferences?

RQ2: Do NSs and L2-learners show sensitivity to the effect of the perception verb in the matrix clause?

Method

Participants

Table 1. Background information about the subjects of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>NE (Native speakers of English)</th>
<th>LN (Native speakers of Russian)</th>
<th>2EER (2-stage learners Russian, tested in Russian)</th>
<th>2ERE (2-stage learners Russian, tested in English)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language proficiency</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>low-oriented</td>
<td>low-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSs</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 learners</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2 years (4 classes per week)</td>
<td>2 years (4 classes per week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stimuli

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Stimuli</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>A neighbor saw the docter of the directer that sat at the café.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>Сосед видел врача директора, который сидел в кафе.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>Noen nevnet dens Sokker direktor, den sit i café.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>The police arrested the director of the mother that sat in the café.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>Полиция арестовала директора мами, что сидит в кафе.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>Politiet anerkallet direktor Genmar, den sit i café.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection and Data analyses

• A self-paced reading task via Linger. • SPSS Generalized Linear Mixed Model.

Results

The perception verb favors the high attachment resolution preference (HA). The effect of the perception verb does not override the native attachment resolution preference: LA for English and HA for Russian.

Hypotheses

Hyp1 for RQ1: NS of Russian prefer HA, NSs of English prefer HA. L2-learners of Russian prefer HA, when tested in Russian, and LA, when tested in English.

Hyp2 for RQ2: All groups of subjects are sensitive to the effects of the perception verb and prefer HA under its influence.

Chart 1. Overall attachment resolution preference by verb type

- Chart 2. High attachment preference per group by verb type

- Chart 3. Overall preference for high attachment resolution preference per group.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb type</th>
<th>F (1,43)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>1.32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>Effect size</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 1 is confirmed: Native speakers of Russian and English show the opposite patterns of attachment resolution preferences. The language of testing influences L2-learners: there is no significant difference between the NE and the 2ERE groups.

Hypothesis 2 is confirmed: Both native speakers and language learners are sensitive to the effect of the verb in the matrix clause. The perception verb favors high attachment resolution preference.

The effect of the perception verb does not override the native attachment resolution preference: LA for English and HA for Russian.

There still are high- and low-attachment languages (see, Grillo and Costa, 2015).

Discussion

Attachment resolution preference under the influence of the perception verb is not an RC-specific phenomenon. The semantics of a perception verb triggers certain syntactic representations that reveal themselves in HA of RC with ambiguities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Mike Iverson, Department of Second Language Studies, Indiana University Bloomington.

References


9. Ionin, T. 2006. This is definitely specific: Specificity and definiteness in article system. Natural Language Semantics, 14, 175. doi:10.1007/s11050-005-5255-9


