The effect of discourse information in the resolution of relative clause attachment ambiguity in L2 English

Tugba Aydin Yildiz¹, Filiz Cele²

¹Bulent Ecevit University/Istanbul Aydin University, Turkey
²Istanbul Aydin University, Turkey

This study examines whether advanced second language (L2) speakers of English use verb-based implicit causality (IC) information in the resolution of relative clause attachment (RC) ambiguity in L2 English in the same way as native English speakers. We tested a group of adult Turkish L2 speakers of English and a control group of native English speakers on two offline tasks in English: (1) a sentence completion task involving sentences with both IC verbs ”(i.e., John detests the children of the musician who ..)” and non-IC verbs (i.e., John babysits the children of the musician who . .)” and (2) a multiple choice test involving sentences with IC and non-IC verbs.

Results from the multiple choice test show that native English speakers chose NP2 'the musician' for the sentences including non-IC verbs, whereas they preferred NP1 'the children' for the sentences including IC verbs, (F(3, 18)=118.13, p<.01). The same results were replicated in the sentence completion task (F (3, 15) =76, 59, p<.01). Results from the L2 group indicate that they preferred NP1 'the musician' in multiple choice test with both IC and non-IC verbs (F (3, 9) =386, 14, p<.01) and in sentence completion task with sentences having both IC and non-IC verbs (F (3, 21) =246, 14, p<.01). These results show that unlike native speakers, Turkish speakers do not use verb-based IC information in RC ambiguity resolution in L2 English. These findings indicate that RC attachment preference of the Turkish group in L2 English is similar to RC attachment preference in their first language (L1), which suggests L1 influence in the resolution of RC ambiguity in L2 English.

Keywords: RC attachment ambiguity, L2 Turkish, English, implicit causality verbs.