

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH PAPER: Processing syntactically ambiguous sentences.

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Forty adult native English speakers and Arabic learners of English participated in this study, which investigated syntactically ambiguous sentences in which a prepositional phrase can be interpreted as a verb phrase attachment or noun phrase attachment. Participants were presented with these types of sentences in addition to sentences with unambiguous prepositional phrases and were asked to decide on their attachment preference. Results show there is a strong preference for a verb-phrase attachment over noun phrase, with less reading time spent by native speakers. The very small time gap between the reading time of ambiguous and normal sentences suggests the L2 learners were puzzled when they came across normal sentences after attempting to resolve sentence ambiguity. The significantly lower total reading time of the two sets of sentences for the control group involves a faster alternation between a two-level processor, the first of which is activated when dealing with simple structures and the second is activated when parsing more complex and ambiguous structures. For the experimental group, the higher total reading time of the two sets of sentences indicates a slower alternation between the two-level processor.

Keywords: L2 English, L1 Arabic, sentence processing, prepositional phrase attachment preference, minimal attachment.