

(29) Why the study of relative clauses processing should not be restricted to subject and object functions

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Introduction Most of the studies about the processing of relative clauses (RCs) ignore functions other than Subject and Object (except Keenan & Hawkins 1987). Crucially center-embedded object RCs have proved to be more difficult to process than their subject counterparts. Typical explanations encompass:

- (a) The loss of canonical order in object RCs (Bever, 1970; Caplan & Waters, 1999).
- (b) The difference of functions of the first NP (e.g. Sheldon, 1974).
- (c) The distance between the filler and the gap (Fodor, 1977; Hawkins, 2004).
- (d) The amount of memory and integration resources required by these structures (Gibson, 1998).

These psycholinguistic explanations are mirrored by a typological scale proposed by Keenan & Comrie (1977), the Accessibility Hierarchy (AH) formulated as Subject < Object < Indirect Object < Oblique < Genitive < Comparative.

The goal of our study is:

- (i) to test the cognitive foundations of the AH by including indirect object (IO) and object genitive RCs (OG);
- (ii) to disentangle between the different explanations: (a) and (b) predict that Subject RCs are easier to process than any others; (c) and (d) predict the following hierarchy : S < O < IO < OG

Method. 30 French speaking participants were presented four types of RCs, S, O, OG and IO in a self-paced experiment. Error rates and reading times were collected.

Results. Hierarchical predictions are not validated: O, and OI and OG RCs show no difference. Hence it is a dichotomic explanation that fits the data best: subject RCs are easier to process, contrary to (b), (c), and (d) above.

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