

The role of language proficiency in the processing of small clauses in the bilingual context

The priming paradigm has been frequently investigated in the bilingual context, as it provides support for either shared or separate systems in bilingual language processing. Unfortunately, so far only little attention has been devoted to explaining how syntactic information is represented in the bilingual mind. Most of experiments investigating the bilingual syntactic priming paradigm conducted so far have therefore relied on psycholinguistic models which have originally been put forward to explain how semantic information of native (L1) vs. non-native language (L2) is stored (Hartsuiker et al., 2004). According to the Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) proposed by Kroll and Stewart (1994), it is the level of proficiency in L2 that is the key factor in language organization of bilingual speakers. Namely, while L2 learners at the early stages of L2 learning are likely to rely on their L1 representations when processing their foreign language, students who are proficient in their L2 are assumed to be able to form direct links between L2 form and meaning.

Our experiment aims at examining the processes involved in language comprehension in bilingualism when applied to the processing of syntactic information. Our participants involved a group of proficient bilingual speakers with Polish as their native tongue and English as their second language. Materials used in the experiment involved sentences hosting “small clause” constructions, which, in generative terms, can be defined as tenseless phrases consisting of a subject NP and an XP predicate (where XP can be an NP, AP, or PP). What is crucial for the present study is that the selectional properties of the main verb (predicate of the main clause) govern the choice as for the category of the small clause predicate. Therefore, this syntactic structure, being also a cross-linguistic phenomenon, provides a plausible testing ground for priming effects, both in within and between language conditions. In particular, the priming properties of the structure [NP PP], in which the PP consists of a preposition followed by an AP, can be tested against small clause structure [NP AP], in which a predicate is solely an AP.

Nineteen highly proficient Polish-English bilingual speakers took part in the experiment, in which two types of Polish and English small clause constructions (with AP and PP predicates) were presented in the primed and unprimed conditions. The results showed faster reaction times (RTs) to primed as compared to unprimed sentences in both native and non-native tongue, and in both within-language and between-language conditions. Interestingly, shorter RTs were also observed to small clause constructions with PP than AP predicates, indicating distinct operations involved in the comprehension of small clauses in which the predicate follows the preposition as compared to the ones in which it does not. In the ongoing experiment, we are further investigating that issue by testing less proficient bilingual speakers in order to examine whether the observed findings are modulated by language proficiency in the non-native language.

References:

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