Consequences of bilingualism and L2 exposure type for the processing of filler-gap dependencies: Data from English-Afrikaans bilinguals

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A number of studies have found differences in second language (L2) and first language (L1) syntactic processing. For example, Marinis et al.’s (2005) self-paced reading task testing subjects’ processing of long-distance wh-dependencies in English finds differences in the L1 and L2 processing of filler-gap dependencies. The authors attribute this result to an “L2 effect” on processing, which posits that it is the L2 status of the language that causes the observed dissimilarities.

One issue with this conclusion is that the bilinguals tested had spent limited time in the L2 setting, leading to limited L2 exposure and use. Pliatsikas and Marinis’ (2013) replication of Marinis et al.’s study addresses the possible impact of type of L2 exposure. They find similar processing behavior in L1 speakers and in L2 speakers who had received naturalistic exposure to the L2. These groups’ results differed from those of the L2 group who had received only classroom exposure.

This paper reports on another replication of Marinis et al.’s (2005) study. The study’s first contribution is that it tested proficient L2 speakers who have spent all their lives in a context where L2 exposure is pervasive. Its second contribution is its use of an L1 control group of bilinguals with comparable levels of L2 proficiency and exposure. The possible effect of the L2 speakers’ bilingualism on their processing behavior is thus controlled for.

Participants were 45 English-Afrikaans bilingual students at a university in South Africa’s Western Cape (28 L1 English-L2 Afrikaans; 17 L1 Afrikaans-L2 English). The results show no main effect of L1 group on the participants’ processing behavior, thus suggesting that the differences previously observed may indeed be due to a bilingualism and/or exposure type effect. Consequences for research into bilingual processing are discussed.
References
