Establishing antecedent reference for L2 reflexive pronouns among L1 Chinese learners of Japanese: An eye tracking study

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This study reports data from an eye tracking experiment measuring the time course in establishing reference for the Japanese reflexive pronoun zibun (自分) by highly proficient L2 speakers whose native language is Chinese (JLPT: N1) (n = 24). Participants heard stimulus sentences that include three NPs (subject, location, goal/instrument) plus a fourth object NP, either syasin ‘picture’ or zibun no syasin ‘self’s own picture’, while viewing an array of four pictures that depict each of the three antecedent NPs plus one distractor item. Subjects then clicked on one of the pictures to answer an auditorily presented follow-up question (Dussias, 2010). Antecedent binding for the Japanese reflexive pronoun may be local or long-distance, but it must be subject oriented (Thomas, 1995). The Chinese reflexive pronoun ziji (自己) exhibits the same subject orientation property and variable binding, though Chinese speakers and Japanese speakers may differ in their preferences for local or long-distance antecedents (Yuan, 1998). Thus, whether Chinese speakers rely on native language processing strategies or on target-like L2 strategies when resolving reference for reflexive pronouns in Japanese, they should be able to avoid interference from intervening non-subject NPs, particularly when the target subject antecedent is within a local domain. A control group of Japanese native speakers (n = 28) demonstrated anticipatory coreference even before the appearance of the reflexive pronoun in the auditory stimuli. Chinese participants demonstrated accurate association of the reflexive pronoun with subject antecedents promptly upon hearing it in the stimuli, but they did not exhibit the anticipation observed among the Japanese native speakers. The disparity in the time course between L1 and L2 speakers of Japanese is attributed not to differences in the processing of pronominal coreference but to extra-grammatical processing demands associated with decoding speech in one’s non-native language.
