Acquisition of Attachment Preferences in European Portuguese

This study investigates attachment preferences with children as young as 3-years-old. Psycholinguistics has mostly focused on adults, which makes this study assume a double importance. Using a picture verification task we intended to test children’s preference in attaching relative clauses and their acquisition of pseudo-relatives (PR).

Cuetos & Mitchell (1988) reported that sentences like “someone shot the maid of the actress that was on the balcony” were not interpreted the same way in English and Spanish; questioning the parser’s universality.

Portuguese has been classified as a HA (Maia & Maia, 2001) and a LA language (Miyamoto, 1999).

This poses a challenge to language acquisition; children must set the grammatical properties and adjust the parser. Predicting a learning to parse stage.

Previous studies correlate children’s working memory and attachment preferences (Swets et al., 2007; Felser et al., 2009).

Grillo & Costa (2012) propose that the asymmetry can be accounted for by the availability of PRs (see Cinque, 1992), a syntactic structure string identical to RCs. This view assumes an innate parser.

We test Grillo & Costa’s prediction. In the first task, the matrix verb excludes PRs. In the second, matrix verbs introduce PRs and we manipulate PR restrictions such as tense and aspect.

After presenting two sets of characters the researcher says:

Eu molhei (RC-only)/ vi (PR) o tio do menino que está a cantar
I soaked / saw the uncle of the child that is singing

Children see images with the characters performing the action of the embedded verb and choose one.

Hypothesis:
(1) If the parser is innate and universal, children will resemble adults’: LA for RCs and HA for PRs.
(2) If the parser is under parametric variation or working memory is relevant: no clear preference.

Preliminary results reveal a clear preference for LA by children, arguing in favor of a continuous behavior and providing evidence for the stability and universality of the parsing principles.

References:
the 12th Annual CUNY Conference on Human Sentence Processing. New York, NY, March 18-20


