ABSTRACT

Relative clauses have fascinated linguists and psycholinguists for decades and have been the field of investigation of theories in the native language (L1) as well as in the acquisition of the second language (L2). The present thesis builds upon the previous research on relative clauses (RC) and seeks to discover whether the comprehension of RCs by Romance learners of English follows a gradient of difficulty and to determine which variables affect this comprehension. More specifically, it aims to see whether the L2 comprehension of RCs matches Keenan and Comrie’s (1977) Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy, which predicts that the comprehension difficulty of subject, object, and oblique RCs is in increasing order, and to detect the influence of L2 syntax, L2 semantics, and cross-linguistic transfer on the L2 comprehension of RCs.

Previous research on RCs has revealed that, in Germanic and Romance languages, some RCs are easier to process by native adults than others, in particular subject RCs that contain animate referents and full noun phrases take less time to process than object ones. In other words, the RC difficulty depends on the syntactic function (subject or object) of the RC, on the semantic animacy of the RC referents (animate or inanimate), and on the semantic category of the embedded nouns (noun phrase or pronoun). This asymmetry between subject and object RCs, however, appears in the processing of RCs by L1 adults, but not in their comprehension. On the other hand, it is unclear whether this asymmetry applies to adult L2 learners because the RC research in L2 acquisition has tested other skills than processing and comprehension and has included languages other than Germanic or Romance languages, for which the subject-object RC asymmetry is still disputed. Therefore, the present research focuses on the comprehension of subject, object, and oblique RCs that contain animate referents and full noun phrases, as in the example *Show me the dog that the cat is chasing*, by learners of English who have Romance languages as L1, in particular French or Italian, so that the conclusions of L1 research on RCs fully apply to the experiment subjects.

Three experiments testing the comprehension of subject, object, and oblique RCs by French and Italian learners of English have produced the following results. First, there is a gradient of difficulty in the comprehension of English RCs by Romance learners in the sense that subject RCs are easier to understand than oblique ones, but it does not follow Keenan and Comrie’s (1977) NPAH, which predicts the unequal comprehension of subject and object RCs, on the one hand, and of object and oblique RCs, on the other hand. Second, the comprehension of RCs by Romance learners is affected by syntactic as well as semantic factors. The syntactic variables influencing the L2 comprehension of RCs are the syntactic function of the RC and the syntactic placement of prepositions inside the oblique RCs. In particular, subject RCs are understood better than oblique ones, and oblique RCs containing clause-internal, stranded prepositions have a comprehension advantage over RCs featuring fronted, pied-piped prepositions. As far as the semantic influence is concerned, it appears that the semantic content of the prepositions
used inside the oblique RCs determines how well the RCs are comprehended by Romance learners of English, and specifically, oblique RCs featuring non-locative prepositions have a comprehension advantage over those containing locative prepositions. Finally, no evidence of cross-linguistic transfer during the L2 comprehension of RCs by intermediate learners of English has been found since Romance learners do not exhibit a better comprehension of oblique RCs with pied-piped prepositions although that RC construction is similar in their L1s.

The experiment results lead to the conclusion, first, that the theoretical accounts that have been formulated to explain RC complexity and that are based exclusively on syntax (such as O’Grady’s (1997) Structural Distance Hypothesis, Minimalism according to McDaniel, McKee, and Bernstein (1998), or the frequency of syntactic patterns) or on semantics (such as MacWhinney’s (1977) Perspective Hypothesis) cannot be satisfactory since they disregard the influence of factors that have been shown to be important. Consequently, future models of RC comprehension will need to be multi-factorial and include the effect of syntactic as well as semantic variables. Second, the failure to identify a gradient of difficulty corresponding to Keenan and Comrie’s (1977) NPAH in the comprehension of RCs by Romance learners of English although that Hierarchy has received support from early research in L2 acquisition highlights the importance of methodological precision: indeed, the early backing of that gradient was based on acceptance and production data that did not aim to test the psychological validity of the Hierarchy in L2 learners. However, once the skill under investigation is clearly defined, in this case comprehension, and tested, it appears that the NPAH is not a good predictor of RC comprehension, and this conclusion converges with the L1 research finding that subject and object RCs are equally well understood. Finally, the absence of cross-linguistic transfer in the L2 comprehension of RCs contrasts with theories of L2 acquisition, which predict that the development of L2 knowledge is permeated by L1 transfer, but it may be the result of the advanced proficiency level of the participants. Nevertheless, it does indicate that L2 learners behave, at some point, in a way similar to L1 speakers and therefore supports other research findings that have revealed that L2 learners can acquire L2 parsing strategies although they may be influenced by their L1s initially.