Marie-Anne C. M. Duffeler

The Comprehension of Relative Clauses by Romance Learners of English: Syntactic and Semantic Influences

Relative clauses have fascinated linguists and psycholinguists for a long time because of their syntactic complexity and their high frequency in language. This dissertation examines the comprehension of syntactically and semantically varied relative clauses by learners of English having French or Italian as L1. It shows first that the L2 comprehension of relative clauses follows a gradient of difficulty, but that the latter does not match Keenan and Comrie's (1977) Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy. Second, it reveals that this comprehension is affected by syntactic as well as semantic variables. In particular, it is influenced by the syntactic function of the relative clause, the syntactic placement of the preposition in oblique relative clauses, and the semantic content of the preposition used in oblique relative clauses. Finally it fails to demonstrate evidence of cross-linguistic transfer. These results lead to the conclusion that theoretical accounts of relative clause comprehension based only on syntax cannot be satisfactory, that methodological precision is essential in the study of relative clauses, and finally that L2 learners may acquire native-like parsing strategies.

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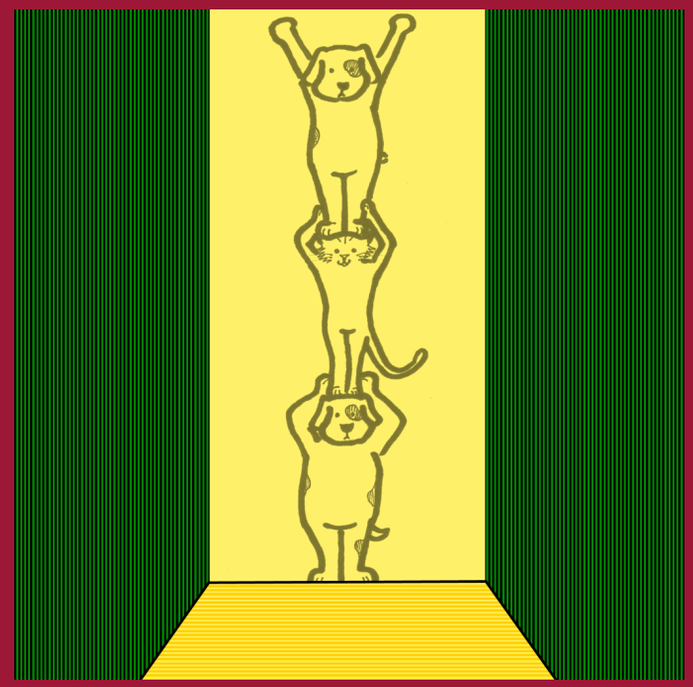

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