

The pseudorelative not-so-first hypothesis?: Evidence from novel manipulations in Italian

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Background: Given the string in (1), the embedded clause can be attached to the structurally higher (high attachment, HA) or lower NP (low attachment, LA). Although principles of locality would predict a LA bias, some languages exhibit a HA bias instead [2]. To account for this, Grillo and Costa [3] point to a structural difference. In languages like Italian, what looks like a relative clause (RC) may instead be parsed as a pseudorelative (PR), forcing apparent HA. Given this additional ambiguity, they propose the parser favors PRs over RCs (PR-FIRST HYPOTHESIS), which they motivate in three ways: PRs are structurally simpler, presuppositionally simpler (RCs presuppose contrast sets), and more relevant (RCs are adjuncts while PRs can be arguments). The first two points should hold regardless of syntactic context and the third should hold wherever PRs can be arguments. However, to date, their proposal has been almost exclusively tested using a single manipulation, perceptual (PR compatible) vs non-perceptual (PR incompatible) predicates (1), which has provided robust support. In response, we present two novel experiments on PR/RC ambiguities in distinct contexts.

(1) *Gianni (ha visto / vive con) il figlio del medico che correva la maratona.*

‘Gianni (saw / lives with) the son of the doctor (that was) running the marathon.’

Experiment 1 exploited the acceptability of PRs as the preverbal argument of some psych predicates in Italian (2). 24 critical sentence pairs (3) were formed from the complex DPs in Grillo and Costa [3] followed by a psych- (PR compatible) or non-psych predicate (PR incompatible) and an animate individual. Participants were 38 L1 Italian speakers. Responses to questions probing attachment preferences (Figure 1) were coded as $\pm$ HA and subjected to a mixed-effects Bayesian regression. This indicated fewer HA responses in the non-psych condition ($\hat{\beta} = -7$ percentage points, 95% CrI [-13 pp, -3 pp]; $P(\beta < 0) > .99$), but a strong LA bias in the psych condition ($\hat{\beta} = 10\%$, 95% CrI [6%, 17%]; $P(\beta > 50\%) < .01$). In **Experiment 2**, another 40 L1 Italian speakers saw 12 of these complex DPs by themselves (*il figlio del medico*) above images corresponding to HA and LA interpretations (Figure 3) and were asked to select which image best matched the text. Responses (Figure 2, coded as $\pm$ HA) were subjected to an intercept-only regression confirming participants exhibited a strong LA bias ($\hat{\beta} = 9\%$, 95% CrI [4%, 20%]; $P(\beta > 50\%) < .01$).

(2) *Gianni che balla ubriaco dà fastidio a Maria.* (Proper name to block RC reading)

‘Gianni dancing drunk annoys Maria.’

(3) *Il figlio del medico che correva la maratona (ispirava / vive con) Gianni.*

‘The son of the doctor (that was) running the marathon (inspired / lives with) Gianni.’

Discussion: As participants exhibited a LA bias in both experiments, we cannot ascribe this to an artifact of the psych/non-psych manipulation. Nor can it be due to inattention (response options were counterbalanced and filler accuracy high). Instead, we must conclude that PRs were not preferred. This patently conflicts with the predictions of the PR-FIRST HYPOTHESIS. It must therefore be recast in a way that captures the replicable preferences for PRs following perceptual predicates [e.g., 1, 3] without overgeneralising. This will have crosslinguistic implications; depending on why PRs are not always preferred, we may no longer expect a correlation between PR availability and “HA languages.”

References

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- [2] Fernando Cuetos and Don C. Mitchell. Cross-linguistic differences in parsing: Restrictions on the use of the Late Closure strategy in Spanish. *Cognition*, 30(1):73–105, October 1988. ISSN 0010-0277. doi: 10.1016/0010-0277(88)90004-2.
- [3] Nino Grillo and João Costa. A novel argument for the universality of parsing principles. *Cognition*, 133(1):156–187, October 2014. ISSN 0010-0277. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2014.05.019.

Figures and Tables

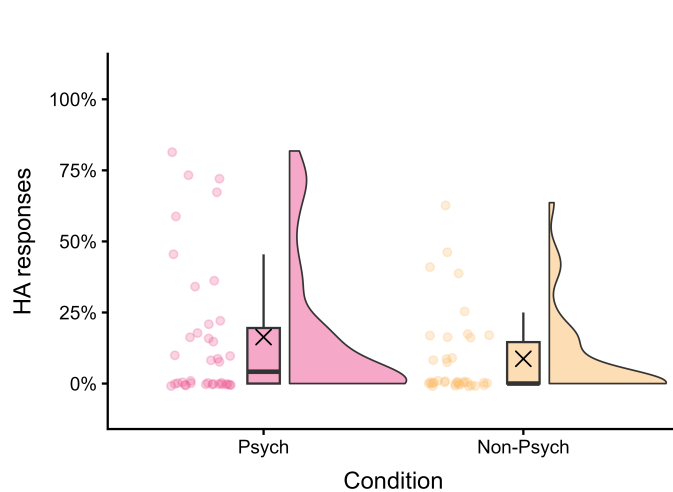


Figure 1: Proportion of HA responses by participant across conditions in Experiment 1 with crosses indicating the by-participant means.

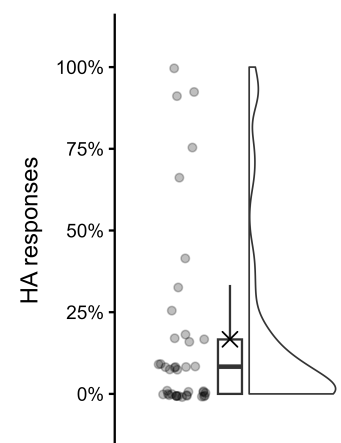


Figure 2: Proportion of HA responses by participant in Experiment 2 with a cross indicating the by-participant mean.



Figure 3: Images corresponding to a HA (PR/RC) and LA (RC-only) interpretation of *il figlio del medico che corre* - ‘the son of the doctor (that is) running.’