

# Preferences in Ambiguity Resolution of Relative Clauses

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## Abstract

This study aims to find out if Korean EFL learners show preferences in ambiguity resolution of English relative clauses (RC), and if so, why they prefer a certain type of interpretation. A relative clause in English is a sort of modifier which modifies an NP. Ambiguity arises in interpretation of the relationship between a modifying RC and the modified NP, as in the example, *someone shot the servant of the actress who was on the balcony*, where the RC could modify either *the servant* or *the actress*. In previous studies, native English speakers show preferences in the interpretation of the relationship. This study will demonstrate that L1 influences in the ambiguity resolution in the interpretation of the RC-NP association in L2. In addition, no correlation is observed between interpretation preferences and L2 proficiency levels.

## Keywords

Relative clauses, ambiguity resolution, attachment preferences, EFL, L1 influence

## 1 RC Attachment Preferences

A sentence containing a relative clause (RC) sometimes creates ambiguity in the interpretation, with respect to the structural configuration of the attachment of the RC. See the example below:

(1) Someone shot the servant of the actress

NP1	NP2
<u>who was on the balcony.</u>	
RC	

The sentence is ambiguous in whether the RC modifies *the actress* or *the servant*. This happens on a par with attachment preferences, which recent studies have taken into account in terms of working memory capacity in processing and interpreting the sentence or differences in syntactic complexity of the target

sentences (Caplan & Waters, 1999; Cuetos & Mitchell, 1988).

Preferences in ambiguity resolution are either low attachment (RC attachment to NP2) or high attachment (RC attachment to NP1). The following illustrates the results of previous research on this issue.

Preferences	Languages
Low attachment (LA)	English, Basque, Brazilian Portuguese, Norwegian, Romanian, Swedish
High attachment (HA)	Spanish, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean

Notice that Korean is an HA preference language (Ha, 2005) while English is an LA preference language. See the Korean examples (Kim, 2009:25).

(2a) High Attachment

Kyengchal-un [nay-ka mannan] kasu-uy  
police-TOP I-NOM meet singer-GEN

chinkwu-lul sso-ass-ta.

friend-ACC shoot-PST-DECL

'The police shot the friend of the singer whom I met.'

(2b) Low Attachment

Kyengchal-un [nay-ka mannan] **kasu-uy**  
police-TOP I-NOM meet singer-GEN

chinkwu-lul sso-ass-ta.

friend-ACC shoot-PST-DECL

'The police shot the friend of the singer whom I met.'

This study is conducted to see what type of preferences Korean EFL learners have in

processing English sentences with ambiguous RC attachment. If they prefer LA, than it can be argued that there is no or not much influence from L1, while if they prefer HA, we may conclude that L1 influences L2 in sentence processing, (particularly ambiguity resolution). Besides, we will see if there is a correlation between attachment preferences and English proficiency levels.

## 2 Experiment

The participants of this study are 53 freshmen in a university in Korea. They were asked to answer the questions about both Korean and English sentences including an ambiguous RC attachment. Below is an example of the English question.

(3) John met the friend of the teacher who was in Germany. Who was in Germany?

a. the friend    b. the teacher

The students answer 20 questions for each language, which include some shadow questions.

The students also took an English grammar test for their English proficiency, in order to investigate if there is a correlation between attachment preferences and English proficiency.

## 3 Results

In processing English sentences with an RC attachment ambiguity, Korean EFL learners show strong HA preferences as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Korean EFL learners preferences

Attachment type	The number of choice	%
HA	386	80.9
LA	91	19.9

Note: The total number of the questions is 477.

Table 2 shows there is no correlation between RC attachment preferences and English proficiency.

Table 2: Correlation between RC attachment

preferences and English proficiency

## Correlation

		The number of HA	Test score
The number of HA	Pearson correlation	1	.038
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.789
	N	53	53
Test score	Pearson correlation	.038	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.789	
	N	53	53

P < .05

## 4 Conclusion

We can interpret the results as evidence showing L1 influences L2 processing, in a sense that Korean EFL learners who prefer HA for their mother tongue also strongly prefer HA for English which is an LA preference language. Furthermore, the L1 influence is so strong that no correlation is observed between RC attachment preferences and L2 proficiency.

## References

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