

Bilingual sentence processing: Relative clause attachment in heritage speakers of Spanish

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Heritage Spanish is often affected by contact with English, although it is not yet well known how this plays out in real-time sentence processing. Previous research on late Spanish-English bilinguals has shown that relative clause attachment, as illustrated by the ambiguity in (1) below, is subject to unusually pronounced cross-linguistic influence and L1 attrition.^{1,2,3} However, more recent work on heritage bilinguals with very high proficiency in Spanish has suggested that their relative clause attachment preferences may be more stable, at least as tested with explicit, global measures of sentence comprehension.^{4,5} The results of the current investigation indicate that the same trend holds even at intermediate level proficiency in the heritage language and with a more meaning-oriented task. Data from self-paced reading show that both the relative clause attachment preferences and the specific timecourse of processing among heritage speakers are the same as those of monolinguals raised and immersed in a Spanish-speaking society. This may be because heritage speakers, as early bilinguals, are more adept at managing cross-linguistic influence than the late Spanish-English bilingual participants from previous research, who did not gain experience as bilinguals in childhood.

(1) El jurado consultó con el abogado del acusado que estaba parado delante la sala.

“The jury consulted with the lawyer_M of the accused_M who was standing_M before the courtroom.”

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