

The L1 Effect on L2 Pronoun Resolution: The Case of Persian-speaking EFL Learners

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Introduction: Reference resolution has been the subject of many studies in pro-drop languages (Kweon, 2011; Lezama & Almor, 2011; Marefat & Sheidaii, 2012; Papadopoulou et al., 2014, among others). Unlike non-prodrop languages, the subject position can be phonetically empty in pro-drop languages which leads to the formation of two pronouns types– null and overt in these languages as demonstrated in (1) which has been taken from Persian.

(1) man/*pro* diruz raftam madrese
I/*pro* yesterday went.1SG school
'I/**pro* went to school yesterday.'

The main hypothesis in the field of pronoun resolution in pro-drop languages is Position of Antecedent Hypothesis (hereinafter PAH) (Carminati, 2002) which states that null pronouns prefer to be attributed to subject antecedents whereas overt pronouns are less strict in selecting their antecedents.

More generally, regardless of the pronoun type, the antecedent in the subject position of a sentence may be preferred over the object antecedent according to Subject Rule Hypothesis (Crawley et al., 1990), or the antecedent in the object position may be preferred over the subject antecedent according to Recency Effect (Gordon & Scearce, 1995).

Objectives: This study aims to see what pattern Persian monolinguals follow in pronoun resolution in their L1. I also hypothesize that if PAH extends to Persian as a pro-drop language, Persian-speaking EFL learners might interpret English pronouns as overt ones in their L1 and show no special preference in their resolution.

Method and Results: This study consisted of two experiments. Each experimental item was divided into four chunks and the reading time of each chunk was measured using chunk-by-chunk self-paced reading method in DMDX software. In the first experiment, 40 Persian monolinguals read items containing subordinate clauses with a singular overt or null pronoun subjects. The antecedent of these pronouns could be either the subject or the object of the matrix clause depending on the agreement as demonstrated in (2) in which slashes show chunk separation.

(2) pirezani /be doxtarha;/darhalike u:*pro* daft az xyaban rad mifod/salam kard
old woman.SUBJ to girls.OBJ while she/*pro* was from street cross hello did
'The old woman said hello to the girls while she was crossing the street.'

Analysis of reading times using Linear Mixed Effect Regression Model revealed that, consistent with the predictions of PAH, the monolinguals prefer to attribute null pronouns to subject antecedents. But, overt pronouns were biased toward neither antecedents. In the second experiment, 39 Persian-speaking advanced EFL learners read items in English in which the singular subject pronoun of the subordinate clause could refer to the subject or the object of the matrix clause based on number agreement as in (3) in which slashes show chunk separation.

(3) The old woman / said hello / to the girls / while she was crossing the street.

The reading times analysis showed that this group had no preference in selecting neither antecedents.

Conclusion: The results of the first experiment confirms the extension of PAH into Persian as a pro-drop language. The findings of the second experiment showed that Persian EFL learners, under the influence of their L1, might have no preference in interpreting English pronouns.

References

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