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Resolving relative clause attachment ambiguity in Persian sentences

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Abstract

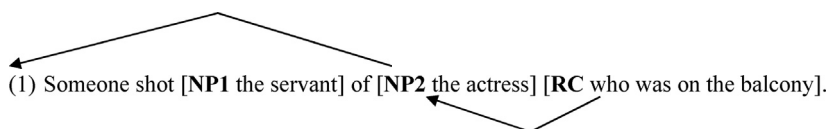
Relative clause (RC) attachment ambiguity arises when there is a competition between two preceding nouns to act as potential hosts for the upcoming relative clause. To resolve this ambiguity in Persian language, one might rely on such intriguing cues as the enclitic marker *-i*, semantic congruity or in/animacy that may appear in the clause. This study addressed the role of the first cue i.e. relative clause enclitic marker (EM) *-i*, which is attached to the second NP, in functioning as a disambiguating cue to hint the relevant antecedent noun. A total number of 20 sentence stimuli were prepared each containing two preceding nouns, one with and one without the marker, followed by an RC, that were given to 49 Persian NSs in offline interpretation tasks to identify their attachment preferences in canonical and EM-supported sentences. The results showed a clear NP1 attachment preference for the canonical but an ambiguous pattern for the EM-supported sentences.

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Keywords: Relative clause (RC) attachment; Preference; NP1/NP2; Relative clause enclitic marker *-i*; High/low attachment

1. Introduction

Psycholinguistic research on sentence processing has recently seen a remarkable upsurge of interest in the topic of RC attachment ambiguity (Checa-Garcia, 2016; Cuetos and Mitchell, 1988; Frazier and Clifton, 1996; Papadopoulou and Clahsen, 2003; Kamide and Mitchell, 1997; Gibson et al., 1996) since it provides a site for understanding the properties of the humans' parsing mechanism and the various types of linguistic information used to resolve the ambiguity. The most well-known sentence used by the scholars to show the RC-attachment ambiguity is:



(Kamide & Mitchell, 1997)

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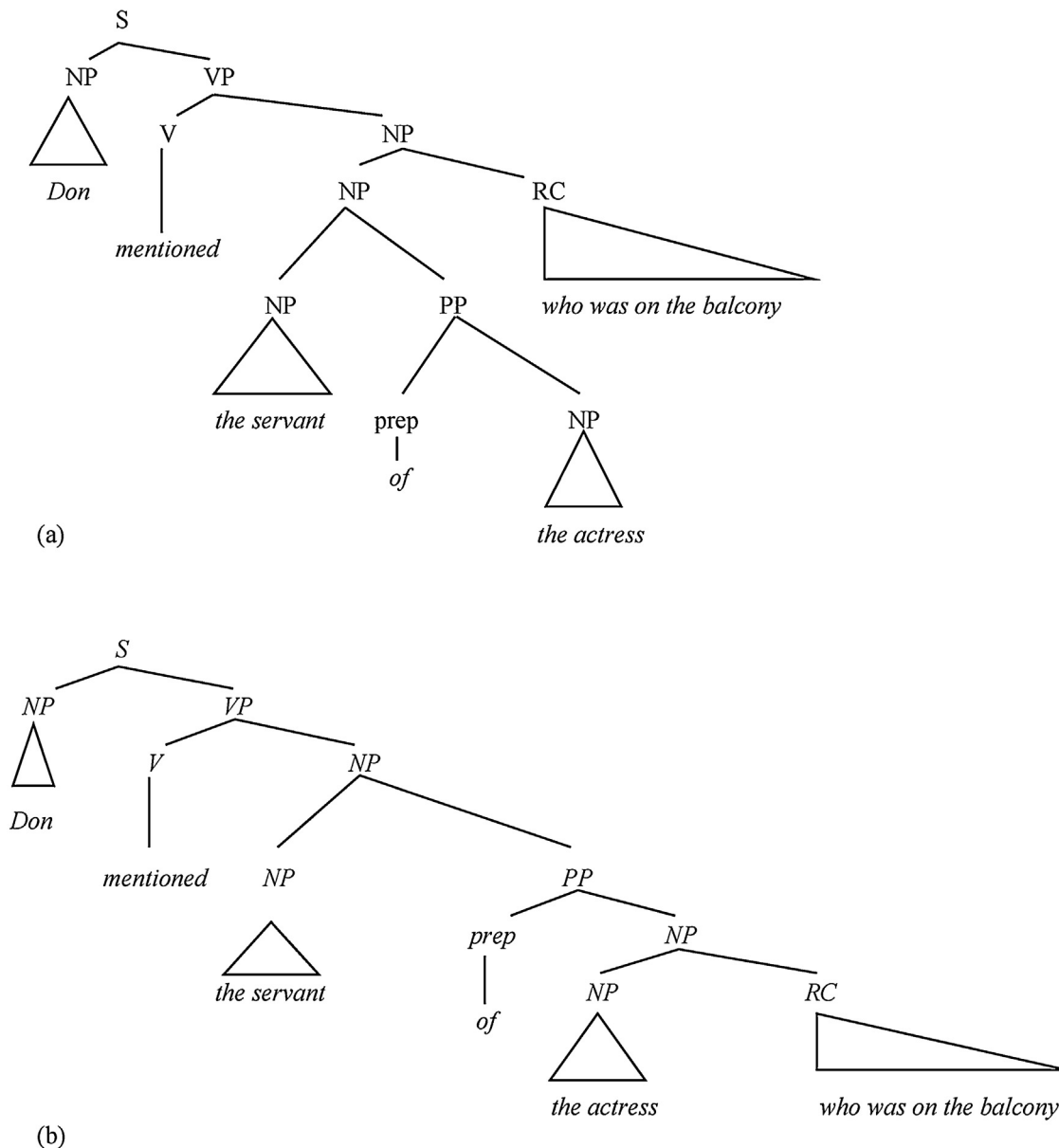


Fig. 1. (a) High attachment of the relative clause (RC). (b) Low attachment of the RC (Scheepers, 2003, p.183).

where the RC, *who was on the balcony*, is preceded by a complex NP, *the servant of the actress*, and, thus, can be attached either to the first NP, *the servant*, or to the second one, *the actress*. In such constructions there are two potential sites for the critical RC (*who was on the balcony*), namely (a) the so-called high attachment (HA) host (referring to the NP higher up in the syntactic tree) and (b) the low attachment (LA) host (referring to the NP lower in the tree) (Scheepers, 2003). In other words, both NPs inside the complex NP have the potential to act as antecedent for the following RC. Therefore, the following two interpretations would be allowed, which causes ambiguity as to which NP should host the RC:

- a. the servant ... was on the balcony. (RC attached to the HA host)
- b. the actress was on the balcony. (RC attached to the LA host)

This HA/LA contrast could also be shown in the form of a tree diagram as in Fig. 1, where, as the hierarchical tree configurations display, sentence a gives out a high attachment representation where the RC is attached to the maximal

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