A low attachment preference in Brazilian Portuguese relative clauses
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When two head nouns are potential hosts for a relative clause (RC), Cuetos and Mitchell (1988) found that English native speakers have a slight preference to attach the RC to the low site, whereas Spanish speakers prefer the high site. In all languages tested so far in which the RC follows the potential host nouns, the result has been a high attachment preference at sentence end similar to Spanish.

This talk provides experimental evidence for a low preference in Brazilian Portuguese. Moreover, it will be argued that recent proposals explaining the low attachment in English (eg. alternative constructions to express the high attachment (Frazier and Clifton (1996); Thornton, Gil and MacDonald (1998)); optionality of the relative pronoun (Hemforth, Konieczny and Scheepers (1997))) cannot account for the present result.

A word-by-word self-paced reading experiment was conducted with sentences as the following.

\[(FRC = \text{full RC}; RRC = \text{reduced RC})\]

\[(1)\]

a) FRC-high:
O eletricista checou o cabos dos aparelhos que foi danificado no dia da inauguração.
the electrician checked the cable of the devices that was damaged on the day of the inauguration
b) FRC-low:
O eletricista checou os cabos do aparelho que foi danificado no dia da inauguração.
c) RRC-high:
O eletricista checou o cabo dos aparelhos danificado no dia da inauguração.
d) RRC-low:
O eletricista checou os cabos do aparelho danificado no dia da inauguração.

Because of the number agreement between the verb in the RCs and the underlined head nouns, the relative clause has to be attached high in (1a) and low in (1b). Similarly for the reduced relative clauses in (1c) and (1d).

There was no significant interaction among the four conditions (p = 0.19). But reading times at the RC were significantly faster in the low conditions (b and d) than in the high (a and c) by subjects and by items (p’s < 0.01). The result also holds when analysing only the reduced RCs, and it is marginal for the full RCs.

A plausibility questionnaire yielded a numerically worse rating for the high conditions (p = 0.41), and there was no correlation between the differences in plausibility and the differences in reading times (r = -0.14; p = 0.43).

The verb in the RC for half of the items was marked as plural and in the other half as singular. There was no interaction between plurality and attachment.

Brazilian Portuguese is a romance language with the usual features (e.g. pro-drop, subject-verb agreement, verbal inflection). One possible difference is word order, which is fairly rigid as in English and French (which has a high preference (Zagar, Pynte and Rativeau (1997))) but in contrast to the Spanish flexible word order. It will be suggested that flexible word order (as in V2 languages or partially in French (Pollock (1989))) leads to a stronger perception of clause boundaries, therefore weakening local attachment preferences.