Early and late preferences in relative clause attachment in Brazilian and European Portuguese

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BACKGROUND

- Preferred interpretations of ambiguous relative clauses (RCs) as in (1) vary cross-linguistically and depending on details of the materials or of the methodology.

1. O Alexandre fotografou o convidado da professora que cantava.
   [Det] Alexander photographed the guest of the teacher who sang [3sg]

- In Brazilian (BP) and European Portuguese (EP) RCs are preferably interpreted as attached HIGH:
  - in questionnaire studies (Maia et al., 2005, among others)
  - in self-paced reading tasks with materials using pragmatic information to disambiguate attachment (Ribeiro, 2001)

- Miyamoto (1999) reports a LOW preference for BP, data from a self-paced reading task using materials disambiguated by number agreement (e.g., (2)); plausible explanations:
  - Agreement interference: The materials, which included forced-high attachments with plural N2s (2c), introduced an artefact (Miyamoto, 2005)

- Universal early low attachment: Early phases of processing RCs are similar in all languages and are guided by a principle such as Late Closure.
  - The shift to high attachment (promoted by extra-syntactic variables, like prosody or pragmatics) comes later in the time-course of processing.

CONCLUSIONS

BP and EP RCs are processed in remarkably similar ways:

- The time-course for processing RC attachments in Portuguese is similar to that observed for Italian (De Vincenzi & Job, 1993) and Spanish (Fernández, 2003):

  a. ... os convidados[pl] da professora[sg] que cantavam[3pl]
  b. ... o convidado[sg] das professoras[pl] que cantavam[3pl]
  c. ... o convidado[sg] das professoras[pl] que cantava[3sg]
  d. ... os convidados[pl] da professora[sg] que cantava[3sg]

BP and EP are different nonetheless:

- The representation of agreement is in the process of weakening in BP, and this might account for the increased error rates in BP compared to EP (Galves, 1993; Kato, 1999)

RESULTS

Early preference: low attachment

Late preference: high attachment, cross-variable difference in errors

REFERENCES