The Preposition Stranding Generalisation: Challenging Evidence from Cypriot Greek

The purpose of this study is to provide empirical evidence from Cypriot Greek (CG) which challenges Merchant’s (2001) Preposition Stranding Generalisation (PSG): “A language L will allow P-stranding under sluicing iff L allows P-stranding under regular wh-movement” (p. 92).

Unlike English (1a), CG does not allow P-stranding (PS) in simple clauses with regular wh-movement but needs to pied-pipe prepositions instead (as in English (1b)). However, and contrary to the PSG, CG seems to allow PS within sluicing. That is, within sluicing, not only does CG exhibit preposition pied-piping (PPP) as in English (2a), but also the option of PS, as in English (2b). Other languages which seem to violate the PSG have been found not to exhibit genuine sluicing but a similar property called pseudosluicing (cf. Merchant 2001, among others).

(1) a. [DP Who] was Mary talking [PP to t₀]? [CG: *]
b. [PP To who] was Mary talking t₀? [CG: √]

(2) Mary was talking to someone, but I don’t know …
a. … [CP [PP to who], C₀ [i-P-[Mary was talking t₀]]]. [CG: √]
b. … [CP who, C₀ [i-P-[Mary was talking [PP to t₀]]]]. [CG: √]

After theoretically verifying that CG exhibits genuine sluicing and not pseudosluicing, using Merchant’s (2001) diagnostics, native speakers were recruited to experimentally attest to the PS-within-sluicing observation in CG. They first participated in an oral production elicitation task with prerecorded utterances containing PS within sluicing (i.e. CG equivalents of (2b)). However, the embedded wh-element contained a case or number mismatch from the co-referent matrix R-expression; participants were asked to repeat the utterance and correct appropriately. One question was whether upon providing the correct utterance participants would spontaneously add the sluiced preposition that regular wh-movement demands. An acceptability judgement task followed, which employed pairs of almost identical prerecorded utterances, with the difference being that the first utterance of each pair exhibited PPP (i.e. CG equivalents of (2a)), whereas the second one exhibited PS (as in (2b)). The hypothesis was that participants would deem PS as acceptable as the frequency with which they had produced it in the previous task.

The oral production data elicitation task revealed that, across the different prepositions examined (e.g., me ‘with’, ja ‘for’, se ‘in’), 81% of utterances participants produced exhibited PS within sluicing. The results from the acceptability judgment task, however, indicated that participants judged 50% of the utterances with PPP to be more acceptable than PS, whereas only 24% preferred PS over PPP, and 24% deemed them to be equally acceptable. In both tasks, identity between the phonetic form of the preposition and the last syllable of the preceding verb affected the PS production frequency and its acceptability rates.

To sum up, in theoretical terms, since the distinction between genuine sluicing and pseudo-sluicing does not seem to provide a sufficient explanation (also e.g. Almeida & Yoshida 2007, Sato 2008, Vicente to appear), the question why certain languages violate the PSG remains open.

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