Assessing the methods to assess relative clauses: the case of aphasics

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In the process of being assessed on the comprehension of Relative Clauses (RCs), the participants who participate in the relevant experiments are usually shown slides that contain a set of pictures and are asked to match one of the pictures they see to the RCs they hear. The RCs to be assessed are not uttered in isolation, but are preceded by short instructions such as the ones below.
a) 'Show me [$_{RC}$ the woman that …]'
b) 'Here is [$_{RC}$ the woman that …]'
For a language whose DPs do not mark morphological case either a) or b) constitute a good introduction for the RCs to be assessed. Greek is not such a language however.

Studies that have investigated the abilities of various Greek-speaking populations on RCs have systematically employed the instruction in a). When the expected discrepancy between subject and object RCs was not obtained, this was attributed to the fact that the relativized subject surfaces with accusative case, as a result of the instruction that precedes it. Accusative instead of nominative case for the relativized subjects was hypothesized to render subject RCs more difficult that they would otherwise be, with the consequence that their difference from object RCs is minimized.

In our study of the RCs of Broca's aphasics we decided not to continue with unconfirmed hypotheses. For this reason, we employed both a) and b), hence, assessed RCs twice within a short period of time. We found that relativized subjects indeed cause more difficulties for RCs when appearing with accusative case. On the contrary, the relativized objects of object RCs that appear with nominative case when introduced as in b), do not cause difficulties. This asymmetry raises interesting questions, some of which I will address in the talk. Moreover, it will be suggested that an accurate assessment of RCs in a language with rich case morphology should employ the same protocol twice, each time with a different introductory phrase, a) and b). Subsequently, the results to be taken into account should employ the subject RCs introduced as in b), and the object RCs introduced as in a). In this manner, the interfering effects of morphological case will be factored out.

Finally, I will present the findings of the core study that unveiled the above methodological issues. It is a study that investigated (potential) minimality effects induced by the morphosyntactic features gender and case in the comprehension of RCs by Broca's aphasics.