

abstract title: **Relative clauses in Mayan: Subject preference under ergativity**
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This paper presents and analyzes the processing of relative clauses (RCs) in Mayan languages Ch'ol and Q'anjob'al.

Background. A large body of work on the processing of relative clauses maintains that subject relatives are generally easier to process than object relatives [2; 3]. However, until recently, cross-linguistic evidence for the subject processing advantage (SPA) in RCs was limited to nominative-accusative languages. In such languages, it is hard to determine whether the processing advantage is due to subjecthood or surface cues like word order, case marking, or agreement. Ergative languages provide an excellent opportunity to tease apart grammatical function and surface cues, since they associate more than one case with the subject position. Unlike nominative-accusative languages, where the SPA and case cueing work in the same direction, in ergative-absolutive languages, the case cue may pull in the opposite direction of the SPA. However, results for Basque [1] and Avar [5] do not seem to show the SPA at all, which necessitates further work on the processing of RCs in ergative languages.

New results. In order to determine whether ergative languages exhibit the SPA, we studied the processing of RCs in Ch'ol and Q'anjob'al, two head-initial ergative languages that mark ergativity via agreement [4]. In both languages, the ergative is syntactic subject, as evident from several diagnostics. Both languages have RCs unambiguous between subject and object interpretation as well as ambiguous RCs. The results indicate a strong processing advantage for subjects. Participants were significantly slower in interpreting object RCs than subject RCs, regardless of whether the subject was absolutive (intransitive clause) or ergative. When presented with unambiguous stimuli, participants were less accurate on object RCs, and with ambiguous RCs, they strongly preferred the subject interpretation. Thus, the SPA appears to be present in Mayan.

Discussion. Our results provide novel evidence for the psychological reality of the notion 'subject', as well as support for the Keenan-Comrie hierarchy in ergative languages. We compare these new results with the findings on RC processing in Basque and Avar, where the SPA seems to be absent, and suggest the SPA applies in a more limited way than usually assumed; in many instances where the SPA has previously been claimed, it may be confounded by surface cues. We also argue that case morphology and agreement morphology are subject to different processing strategies.

References

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