

Testing the Interpretability Hypothesis: evidence from the L2 processing of relative clauses by Persian and French learners of L2 English

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Introduction

- Functional features divided into interpretable (e.g., *wh* on *wh*-pronouns) and uninterpretable features (e.g., *EPP* & *wh* on *C*)
- Interpretability Hypothesis (IH; Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007): uninterpretable features no longer accessible in adult L2 acquisition

Generative Linguistics Analysis

- Resumption (overt realisation of TP agreement features) ungrammatical in French and English, grammatical in Persian direct object and object-of-preposition RCs
- French and English relativisers (Agree between spec CP & C): both *wh*-pronouns (e.g., *lequel*, *who*) and invariant complementisers (e.g., *qui*, *that*) allowed
- Persian relativisers (agreement between spec CP & C): only invariant complementiser (*ke*) allowed

L1	relativiser			English & French similar
	complementiser	<i>wh</i> -pronoun	resumption	
English	YES	YES	NO	Persian: (a) resumption allowed; (b) only relativiser: invariant complementiser
French	YES	YES	NO	
Persian	YES	NO	NO	

Method

- 2 (resumption, gap) x 2 (wh-pronoun *who*, complementiser *that*)
- Participants: 44 L1-English, 52 L1-French, 71 L1-Persian
- Main task: Grammaticality judgment (untimed + required to correct if judged ungrammatical)
- Stimuli: 56 sentences with RCs; half grammatical (+ gap), half ungrammatical (+ resumption)
- *The professor who / that you submitted your assignments to *her / ___ was angry*
- Additional measures: c-test (proficiency), reading span (WMC)
- Predictions of IH: (1) L1-French = L1-English
- (2) L1-Persian different:
 - (a) higher acceptability of resumptive RCs;
 - (b) acceptability of *that* ... resumption higher than
 - Acceptability of *who* ... resumption;
 - (c) little evidence for acquisition of [EPP]
- (3) Syntactic deficits in L1-Persian grammars; little impact of individual differences in proficiency, immersion experience, & WMC

Contact details

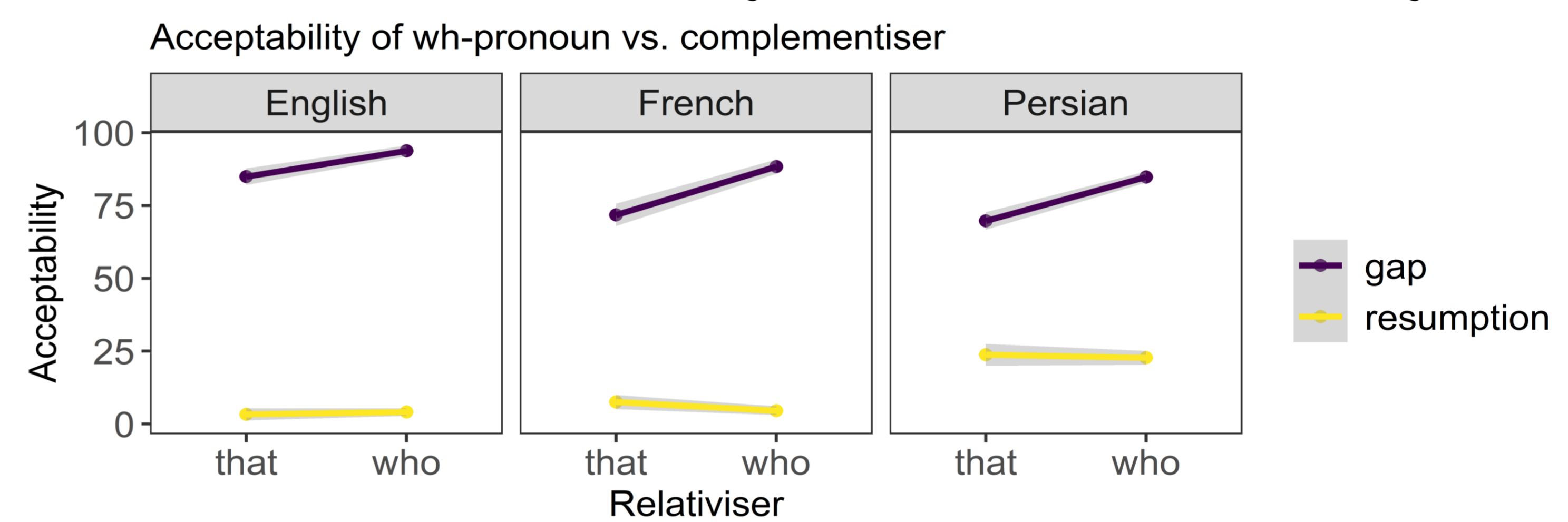
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Results and Discussion

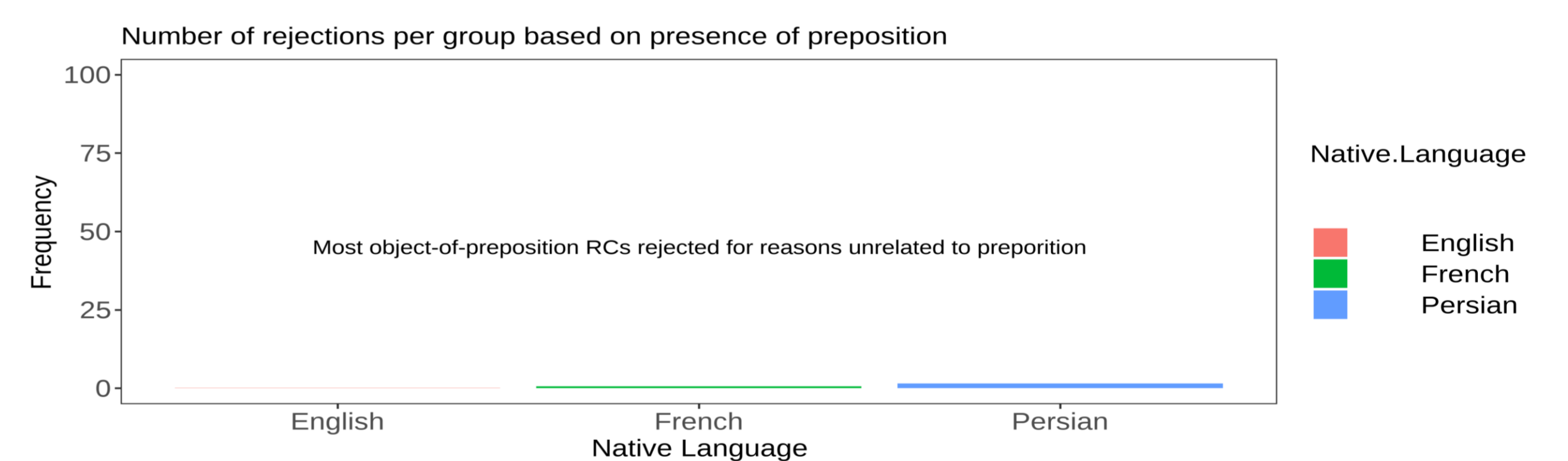
(a) Operating on L1-based uninterpretable features?

- L1-Persian more likely to accept resumption → L1-transfer of uninterpretable features or processing preferences?
- Same interaction resumption x relativiser for all groups; resumption acceptability unaffected by choice of relativiser → syntactic deficits less likely



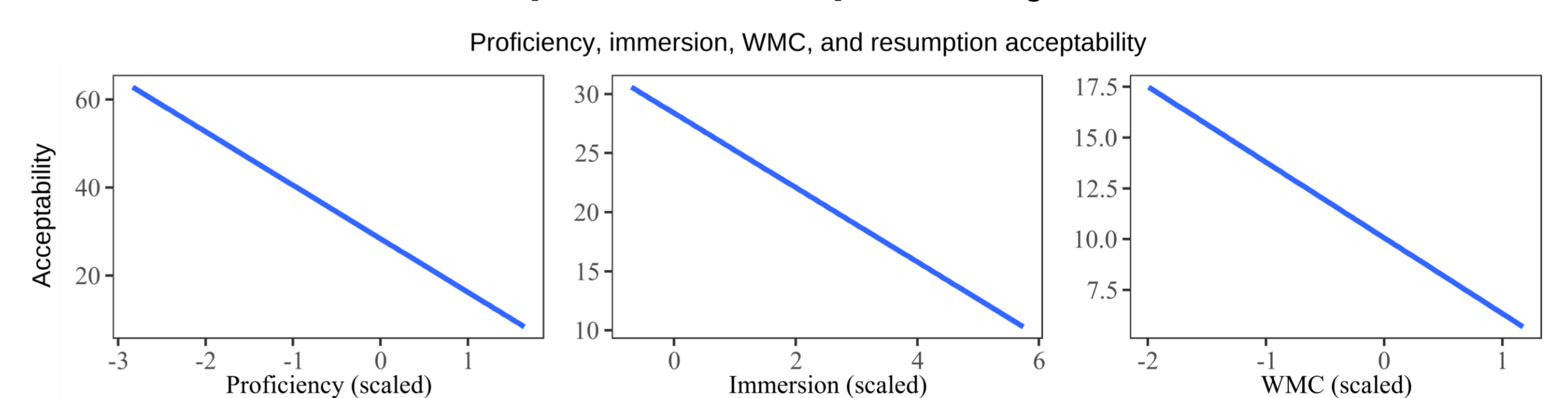
(b) Issues with [EPP] for wh-movement?

- Previous research (Lardiere, 2008): if EPP unlearned and *wh*-morpheme base generated, L2ers tend to reject object-of-preposition RCs due to preposition
- Little evidence *wh*-morpheme base generated: No between-groups differences in number of preposition deletion



(c) Individual differences in proficiency, immersion, WMC helps pre-empt resumption strategy?

- High proficiency, immersion, WMC reduces L1-Persians' resumption acceptability



Conclusion

- Resumption in L2 relativisation strategy unlikely to reflect syntactic issues at a highly advanced L2 proficiency
- Uninterpretable features likely remain accessible in L2 acquisition of English RCs
- Support for full-access approaches to L2 acquisition

References

Lardiere, D. (2008). Feature assembly in second language acquisition. In Liceras, J.M., Zobl, H. and Goodluck, H., editors, *The role of formal features in second language acquisition*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 106–140. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315085340-5>

Tsimpli, I. M., & Dimitrakopoulou, M. (2007). The Interpretability Hypothesis: Evidence from *wh*-interrogatives in second language acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 23(2), 215–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658307076546>