1. INTRODUCTION

The last quarter century has seen a burgeoning of systematic and controlled experimental studies of language processing. In this program of studies, 90% of the work has been based on a single language (English) with just a tiny portion of the research effort being devoted to the other 6000 or so languages of the world. Given these circumstances, it is sensible to ask whether the outcomes of this enterprise offer insights into language processing in general or whether researchers have just been formulating dubious generalizations based on idiosyncratic features of individual languages. The present chapter provides a case study of an area of psycholinguistic research in which investigators may have been in danger of overgeneralizing from a narrow evidence base. We shall examine an aspect of parsing in which widely accepted generalizations have turned out to be inaccurate or incomplete and in which languages other than English appear to operate according to principles previously unexplored in mainstream research. The work raises questions about the possibility that different languages are analyzed by...
means of qualitatively different procedures. If this turns out to be the case, then a full account of language processing will have to cover more than a description of the general procedures that might be shared by all language-processing systems. It will also have to say something about the special-purpose operations that occur only in individual languages or in subclasses of languages.

2. BACKGROUND

Our discussion will focus on the aspects of syntactic analysis that are responsible for deciding whether a word, phrase, or clause should be associated with one of two or more competing “attachment sites” within a sentence. Classic examples include (1) and (2).

(1) The man saw the spy with binoculars.
(2) Barbara said the politician died yesterday.

In both cases an ambiguous constituent (italicized) can be linked to either of two attachment sites in the sentence (marked in bold). A central challenge for parsing theories is to set out the principles which form the basis for resolving ambiguities of this kind (together, of course, with numerous other examples).

Our treatment of the issue will concentrate exclusively on examples like (2), in which the two potential hosts are both from the same word-class. Although both are verbs in this particular illustration, the two attachment sites will both be nouns in all of the examples considered after this. A decade ago there was, in essence, a complete consensus about the broad principles underlying attachment decisions of this kind. The operating principles were based uniformly on the relative positions of the as-yet-unattached constituent and the competing head sites, and all accounts posited that the new constituent would be attached to the nearest or most recent site. The principle underlying this choice was given a variety of sobriquets, but the claim was essentially the same. In (2) the proposal was that ‘yesterday’ is attached to the nearby ‘died’ rather than the more distant ‘told’ following principles dubbed Late Closure, Right Association, Local Association, and numerous other terms. Thus, in the terminology of the most influential parsing model of the time, Frazier’s (1979, 1987) garden-path model, the relevant operating rule (Late Closure) was “attach new items . . . into the phrase or clause postulated most recently.” Attach ‘yesterday’ to ‘died’ in preference to ‘told.’

Given the theoretical statements current in the mid-1980s it seemed perfectly clear that the same operating principles should apply to sentences like (3).

(3) Someone shot the servant of the actress who was on the balcony.

As before, the ambiguous constituent can be attached to one of (at least) two different sites—again represented by words of the same class (both nouns). Here, as before, the prevailing “recency” or “locality” principles stipulated that the new