

Beyond Simpler Syntax: Processing complexity and explaining island phenomena

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I focus on three closely related questions:

- Why do natural languages have extraction islands?
- Why do extraction islands take the form that we observe?
- Why is there variability in the acceptability of extraction island violations?

The Simpler Syntax (SS) perspective of Culicover and Jackendoff (2005, 2006) suggests a particular way of answering these questions. On the SS view, syntactic representations are as simple as possible, as long as the correspondence between form and meaning is accounted for. Maximizing the simplicity of the syntax leads to the hypothesis that that violations due to extraction from islands are not part of syntax, but have to do with unacceptability that arises from processing complexity. Configurations contribute a certain degree of complexity, and other factors contribute to complexity as well, producing variability in acceptability judgments.

Hence SS fits comfortably with recent work that argues that the complexity of processing sentences contributes in essential ways to judgments of unacceptability, including cases that have traditionally been categorized as "island violations" (Arnon et al. in press; Featherston 2005; Hawkins 1994, 2004). The key idea is that unacceptability judgments arise when the complexity of mapping the syntactic representation into the corresponding conceptual structure representation exceeds a certain threshold (Culicover and Nowak 2002; see also Keller 2000 and Kluender 1998, 2004). I apply Kluender's proposals about how to measure complexity to a number of classical island phenomena. It appears that complexity beyond the threshold produces the subjective experience of unacceptability, and that grammaticality per se is not at issue. Moreover, relative complexity appears to determine the acceptability of extraction and the acceptability of parasitic gaps in similar ways, albeit with different consequences, suggesting as expected that complexity beyond the threshold blocks the identification of both true and parasitic gaps (cf. Phillips 2006).