

Processing Information Structure: an Account of Islandhood

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Current work on islands raises the question of whether a unified account can be offered for all island effects. The answer to this question clearly depends on one's view of what counts as an island effect.

A large array of island effects can be accounted for (e.g., extraction, islands, superiority) under the view that such effects follow from the sensitivity of processing to the linear alignment of Information Structure (topic-focus) with syntactic structure (subject-predicate). A particular strength of this approach is its ability to predict the context sensitivity and gradedness of some of the effects and the absoluteness of others. Another advantage of the approach is that it naturally accounts for the repair of islands by resumptive pronouns and sluicing.

One of the problems with a processing account of islands is the existence of island effects in wh-in-situ languages: If the processing account is based on the idea that it is the processing of the filler-gap relationship that is at stake, then it would predict that island effects would be lacking in wh-in-situ languages (Lasnik, 1999, Boeckx, 2007). The proposed processing account's requirement that Information Structure (IS) be aligned with syntactic structure does, however, nicely accommodate these facts and predicts that the island effects in these languages mirror those of wh-movement languages (Bayer, 2005).

Another problem with processing accounts in general is that no language variation is predicted. In fact, languages vary with respect to both superiority and extraction. Here these differences are made to follow from different options available to mark topics and foci in these languages.

The account proposed here also has architectural consequences: IS processing explains linear order as well as islandhood. Therefore these phenomena should be removed from the domain of grammar proper and be handled by the interfaces instead. One possible way of reconciling the two points of view, one forcing IS outside of grammar, the other keeping it inside, is to consider IS part of the phonological computation.