Processing Strategies and Resumptive Pronouns in English
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Abstract
In a magnitude estimation task, 23 native speakers of English rated sentences with sub-gap and obj-gap indefinite relative clauses (RCs) formed from non-islands and islands, with and without a resumptive pronoun (RP). We found that while subject RPs, but not object RPs, improve acceptability in islands, resumptive RCs receive a uniformly low acceptability rating across clause types. The attested subject-object asymmetry thus is not a function of resumption itself but instead is due to the fact that subject empty gap RCs are much less acceptable than object empty gap RCs.

Background
- Experimental work on subject resumption (McDaniel & Cowart 1999): Subject, but not object, RPs are better than empty gaps in weak island RCs.
- Experimental work on subject/object resumption (Keffala & Goodall 2011): Definite RCs formed from simple clause, that-clause, wh-island and RC island show no difference in acceptability between subject and object resumption.

Research Questions
- RPs are more common with indefinite RCs than definite RCs in corpus (Prince 1990, 1997, Ariel 1999).
- 1. Do RPs improve the acceptability of subj-gap indefinite RCs formed from strong islands as well as weak islands?
- 2. In island indefinite RCs, are subj-gap RPs more acceptable than obj-gap RPs?

The Experiment
Methods
- Task: Magnitude Estimation
  Participants rate the acceptability of each test sentence in proportion to the score assigned to the reference sentence.
- Within-subjects design: 2 x 2 x 2 (8 conditions)
  - Clause Type: relativization from non-island / island
  - Gap Type: empty / pronoun (RP)
  - Gap Position: subject / object
- Participants: 23 native English speakers living in Vancouver, Canada
- Procedure: 6 practice trials
  96 test trials (12 per condition) + 72 fillers
  Items rated in a uniquely generated random order using WebExp (Keller et al. 2009)

Findings
- Repeated measures ANOVA
  - Interaction of Gap Type and Clause Type: F(1,22)=18.43, p<0.001
  - Interaction of Gap Position and Clause Type: F(1,22)=9.31, p=0.006

- Pairwise comparisons
  - Subj-Emp-Island and Subj-Pro-Island: p<0.02
  - Obj-Emp-Island and Obj-Pro-Island: Not significant

Materials
- All test items were transitive; RCs modified indefinite matrix objects.
- The manager fired a reporter [who the editor speculated why (he) defamed the senator].
- 4 test frames:
  1. The manager fired a reporter who __________
  2. The chair met an undergraduate who __________
  3. The detective interrogated a man who __________
  4. The director hired an actor who __________

Discussion
Answering the research questions
- RPs improve the acceptability of subj-gap indefinite RCs formed from weak or strong islands.
- Due to decreased acceptability of empty subj-gap RCs
- The acceptability of resumptive indefinite RCs is uniformly low across both gap positions and across all structures tested.
- RPs do not repair island violations.

Uniformly low rating of resumptive RCs
- Hearers initially employ the movement strategy when presented with an RC.
- An unexpected RP results in a uniform penalty across the board.
- Processing resumptive RCs requires strategy shift akin to a garden-path effect.

Conclusion and Future Work
- We replicated the main findings in a 7-point scale experiment.
- In the process of conducting a similar experiment with auditory stimuli to test if resumption is a speech phenomenon.
- In the process of designing a self-paced reading study to test the strategy shift hypothesis

Selected References

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