

Listening to resumptives: An auditory study of object resumption in English

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The claim that resumptive pronouns (RPs) ameliorate island violations in English is widespread in the theoretical literature. Yet this intuition has not been substantiated by experimental work [1], [2]. We present a large-scale experiment on the acceptability of object RPs in English under several island conditions. Unlike previous experimental studies, this study uses auditory stimuli.

The experiment used a 2x3x3 factorial design: *wh*-question/declarative; adjunct islands/complex noun phrases/factive islands; island violation with a gap/island violation with RP/grammatical control (see (1)-(3) for the declarative examples of island violations). There were 540 items with corresponding comprehension questions. Participants (N=64) listened to items and rated them on a 5-point Likert scale. Replicating past reading-based findings, we found no difference in the ratings of adjunct islands with RPs as opposed to adjunct islands with gaps, no difference in the rating of complex noun phrases with RPs compared to gaps, or of factives with RPs vs. gaps (all p 's > 0.05). Post-hoc, we pursued the potential confound that many English verbs can be used in both transitive and intransitive frames without any morphological change. This means that a sentence *This is the wheel that because Mary turned ___ she moved the ball* could be interpreted as either containing a gap or as the nonsensical, but arguably more grammatical version in which Mary turns *herself*, and the ball moves. Using VALEX [3], we determined which stimuli contain verbs that are at least as likely to occur in an intransitive frame as in a transitive frame. When those stimuli were removed, the mean rating of adjunct islands with RPs became significantly better than those with gaps ($p < 0.05$). It is still lower than the rating of the grammatical controls.

The selective preference for RPs over gaps in adjunct islands but not other types of islands suggests that resumption appears for reasons other than island repair. Of the three island types considered here, the adjunct clauses are all high adjuncts and the only ones that are associated with the main predication (noun modifiers and factives are part of an argument). They are used to denote a subsidiary event related to the main event. The main and adjunct clause, can therefore be construed as part of a coherent discourse. If so, the use of resumption in adjunct clauses is similar to the use of cross-sentential anaphora ([Main clause ... [Adjunct ... pronoun_i...] NP_i ...]). Such discourse anaphora is simply impossible in the other types of clauses, and resumption is rejected there. Overall our results confirm that resumption in English does not rescue islands, thus supporting the findings in [1], [2]. This view of English resumption differentiates it from "true" resumption in languages such as Irish or Lebanese Arabic and offers further support of McCloskey's position that the two phenomena are different [4]. The adjunct island results can be accounted for in terms of discourse anaphora and performance pressures in production.

- 1) Adjunct-Island Gap: This is the metal that unless the company mines ___ there will be a shortage.
Adjunct-Island RP: This is the metal that unless the company mines it there will be a shortage.
- 2) CNP-Island Gap: This is the metal that the company that mined ___ got a government contract.
CNP-Island RP: This is the metal that the company that mined it got a government contract.
- 3) Factive-Island Gap: This is the metal that the fact that the company mined ___ devalued its stock.
Factive-Island RP: This is the metal that the fact that the company mined it devalued its stock.

References

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