

Islands: A Mixed Analysis

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This paper addresses the nature of “islands” in *wh* (long-distance dependency) constructions, as in (1).

- (1) *Which word processor did you hear the rumor that Bill Gates uses?

The literature on islands can be basically split into two groups: those that provide a syntactic explanation and those that provide a pragmatic explanation. The standard LFG account of the ill-formedness of (1), due to Kaplan and Zaenen (1989), traces it to constraints on the path between the two grammatical functions borne by the *wh* element: in English, the path is limited to COMP, XCOMP, and OBL_θ, but in this case it would have to go through OBJ. This is a purely syntactic approach. It suffers, *inter alia*, from the weakness of predicting more cross-linguistic variation than there actually is, since each language is free to include any set of grammatical functions on the path.

On the other side, it has been observed that the ill-formedness of (1) is not a fact to be viewed in isolation. It is correlated with the inability of the fronted element to be pragmatically prominent in the clause in which it appears. Viewed from this perspective, islands are not arbitrary constraints imposed by the syntax, but rather a consequence of the informational content of sentences (Kuno 1976, 1987, Erteschik-Shir and Lappin 1979, Erteschik-Shir 1997, Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). Under this view, the reason that (1) is ill-formed is that *you heard the rumor that Bill Gates uses (it)* cannot be construed as being about *which word processor*. The pragmatic analysis of the CNPC is supported by the observation that changing the sentence in order to make a pragmatically prominent reading for the fronted element more plausible improves the *wh* construction. For example, the reason that the OBJ of *use* cannot be pragmatically prominent in (1) is that *the rumor* is definite and thus itself pragmatically prominent; replacing the definite article with something that draws less prominence to the head noun (such as the indefinite article or certain uses of demonstratives) improves the extraction.

- (2) a. ?Which word processor did you hear a rumor that Bill Gates uses?
b. ?Which word processor did you hear that rumor that Bill Gates uses?

However, existence of pragmatic motivation for islands does not mean that there is no syntactic involvement. The syntactic side of islands can be seen in several ways; one is revealed by examining Complex NP Constraint effects in relative clauses. While elements within relative clauses generally cannot be pragmatically prominent (and thus cannot be fronted), if the head of the relative construction is a relatively light nominal expression a pragmatically prominent interpretation is possible. In Danish (Erteschik-Shir and Lappin 1979), the judgments on CNPC violations match the pragmatic status:

- (3) a. *Det har jeg drillet mange der har gjort.
that have I made.fun.of many who have done
'That, I have made fun of many who have done.'
b. Det er der mange der kan lide.
that are there many who like
'That, there are many who like.'
c. Det kender jeg mange der kan lide.
that know I many who like
'That, I know many who like.'

However, in English the facts are not quite so congenial. With *there*, there is some amelioration, although speakers disagree on how much.

- (4) a. ?Which word processor are there many people who like?
b. ?TextMangler is a word processor that there are many people who like.

However, in other cases, there is little or no amelioration for many speakers.

- (5) a. *Which word processor have you found many people who like?
b. *TextMangler is a word processor that I have found many people who like.

