

Does English resumption really fail to repair island violations?

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Ross (1967) discovered island constraints that block long-distance dependency formation across certain structures, but he also noted that island violations do not arise when resumptive pronouns are used. This finding has led to many proposals on the nature of island constraints (Boeckx, 2008; Cinque, 1990), but a magnitude estimation study by Alexopoulou and Keller (2007) questions the presence of ‘island repair’ effects in English. For example, they examined the relative acceptability of relative clause (RC) island violations and their counterparts with resumptive pronouns (1), but found no difference in acceptability.

(1) Who₁ does Mary meet the people that will fire **t₁/him₁**.

This is rather surprising, given that many linguists have reported English judgments that support Ross’s original observation. One possible reason is that island repair effects are restricted to the subject position (McDaniel & Cowart, 1999), but another potential reason is the property of the specific *wh*-phrase in (1). Erteschik-Shir (1992) observes that in a language like Hebrew where resumption can be used in the absence of island violations, resumptive pronouns need antecedents with a restrictive focus, i.e., they must refer to a set of individuals that are known to the speaker/hearer. Alexopoulou and Keller used the bare *wh*-phrase *who*, which does not meet this pragmatic condition. Moreover, the participants may have treated *him* as a deictic pronoun. This would cause a vacuous quantification and render the sentence ungrammatical.

Addressing these methodological concerns, we conducted a 7-point-scale acceptability judgment study using 16 sets of target items with four conditions (2).

(2) The director remembered *which hairdresser*...

a/b. ...the cameraman speculated that the actor had kissed _____/her. (no island)

c/d. ...the cameraman hated the actor that had kissed _____/her. (RC island)

We used d-linked *wh*-phrases that meet the restrictive focus condition (Pesetsky, 1987), and also avoided the deictic reading of the pronoun by ensuring that the *wh*-phrase is the only NP in the sentence that matches the pronoun in gender bias (based on Kennison & Trofe, 2003), number and animacy features. We manipulated two factors (islandhood and resumption) to examine island repair effects and the baseline cost of resumption, and counter-balanced these items across four lists together with 36 fillers of similar length and complexity.

The data from 16 native speakers of American English (Figure 1) showed a main effect of island [$F(1,15) = 70.9$, $p. < .001$] and resumption [$F(1,15) = 50.7$, $p. < .001$], as well as a significant interaction of the two factors [$F(1,15) = 25.8$, $p. < .001$]. The pair-wise comparison revealed that resumption significantly degraded the no-island condition [2a vs. 2b: $t(1,15) = 7.2$, $p. < .001$], while there was no difference between the two RC island conditions [2c vs. 2d: $t(1,15) = 1.7$, $p. = .109$].

These results indicate that resumption does not improve English RC island violations even when the *wh*-phrases meet the restrictive focus condition and the antecedent is made clear. This finding lends further support to Alexopoulou and Keller’s observation that English resumption in object positions does not repair island violations.

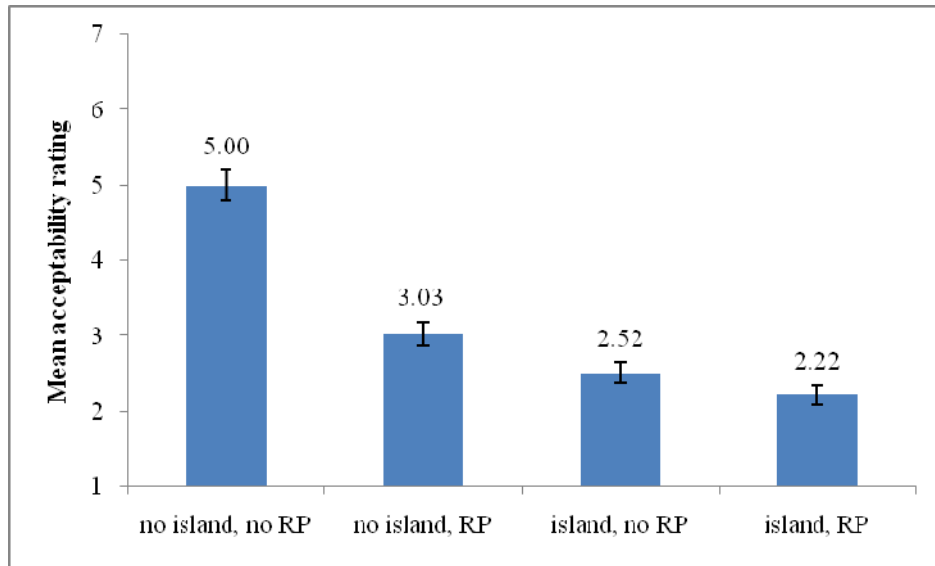


Figure 1. Mean acceptability rating on resumption and island (n=16)

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