

Subject islands aren't islands, and parasitic gaps aren't parasitic, or, The Case of the Uninvited Guest

Abstract

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In this talk we argue for two propositions. One is that subject islands, that is, the unacceptability of extractions from subject (ExtrSubj), do not reflect a grammatical constraint (e.g. the Subject Condition). The other is that the amelioration of subject islands in parasitic gap configurations is not the consequence of a special grammatical mechanism. Both, we argue, reflect aspects of syntactic processing and in particular, factors that contribute to processing complexity.

Our argument follows the following lines. First, we review briefly the classical evidence that there is a grammatical constraint that rules out ExtrSubj as ungrammatical. We also review the substantial literature that shows that subject islands are a variable phenomenon, and not a matter of grammaticality *per se*. To further support this position, we cite actually occurring corpus data showing fully acceptable naturally occurring cases of ExtrSubj.

These observations bring us to the phenomenon of parasitic gaps. We argue that the ameliorating effect of the parasitic gap configuration is precisely to remove the referring expression that produces additional problematic processing load in the case of ExtrSubj. We call this phrase the 'Uninvited Guest'.

The Uninvited Guest approach covers the same basic empirical phenomena as the classical parasitic gap analysis. Both explain why it is that sentences with ExtrSubj and true gaps are more acceptable than comparable sentences that lack true gaps. In order to argue for the explanatory superiority of the Uninvited Guest, we must show that parasitic gap configurations are neither necessary nor sufficient for amelioration of island violations. Thus, we show that the Uninvited Guest accounts for differential judgments where islands are not at issue. And we show that it is not fully general in the case of islands, in that there are island violations that are not ameliorated by a true gap.