The Puzzle of Subject Islands

Are there different types of subject islands?
- Hirn (1999) shows that subject islands undergo salutation. However, she only looked at extraction out of unaccusative subjects.

- Are some subjects more permeable than others: subjects of unaccusatives vs. subjects of unergatives vs. subjects of transitives?

What makes extraction out of a subject difficult? Three possibilities are:
- Base position of the argument (external vs. internal) (Merchant 2001).
- Topicality of the argument (topics = islands) (Gundel 1974, Erteschik-Shir 2007).
- Complexity of argument structure (number of arguments).

In the following studies, we test these possibilities, using English and Russian data.

Subject Island Extraction in English

English allows us to manipulate the number of arguments, and the base position of the subject (internal or external argument).

**Design:**
- 3x2 design
- Ungrammatical items and grammatical controls
- Verb conditions: unaccusative, transitive, and unergative
- Self-paced reading task (n=35) and 1-5 rating task (n=37; 36 items)

**Example stimuli:**
- Extraction
  - a. Janet wonders what the conference on ___ lasted for a week (unaccusative)
  - b. Janet wonders what the conference on ___ succeeded for a week (unergative)
  - c. Control (grammatical)

- Horizontal reading (n=16)

**Examples:**
- English (SV):
  - a. Janet wonders what the conference on ___ lasted for a week (unaccusative)
  - b. Janet wonders what the conference on ___ succeeded for a week (unergative)
  - c. Control (grammatical)

**Russian Reading Times:**

- Unaccusative: 1.46, 1.46, 1.46, 1.46 (SV)
- Transitive: 2.36, 2.36, 2.36, 2.36 (SV)
- Unergative: 3.59, 3.59, 3.59, 3.59 (SV)
- Passive: 4.75, 4.75, 4.75, 4.75 (SV)

**Russian Judgment Task:**

- Passive: 2.24, 2.24, 2.24, 2.24 (SV)
- Transitive: 2.56, 2.56, 2.56, 2.56 (SV)
- Unergative: 3.59, 3.59, 3.59, 3.59 (SV)
- Passive: 4.75-499 (SV)

**Conclusion:**

- Are there different types of subject islands?
  - Yes: unaccusative subjects in English, and postverbal intransitive subjects in Russian, are weaker islands.
  - Transitive subjects are invariably strong islands.

What makes extraction out of a subject difficult?
- Topicality:
  - The topicality of the subject appears to be the most important factor, but only for intransitive subjects.
- Complexity of the argument structure: transitives are strong, regardless of word order.

**References**


