**Listening to Resumptives: An Auditory Experiment**

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**Abstract**

The claim that resumptive pronouns (RPs) ameliorate island violations in English is widespread in the theoretical literature, but this intuition has not been substantiated by experimental work. We present a large-scale experiment on the acceptability of object RPs in English under several island conditions using auditory stimuli. In line with previous findings, we find no significant difference between participants’ ratings of island violations with gaps compared to those with resumptive pronouns (all p > 0.05). Furthermore, we find no evidence to suggest that English RPs facilitate sentence comprehension, as participants were as accurate with comprehension questions pertaining to sentences with RPs as they were with gaps and controls (all p > 0.05). We propose that resumptive pronouns do not fix derivational problems in English, but are used as a comprehension tracking device by the speaker, for the speaker.

**Materials**

- 40 experimental items: 18 conditions with 3 examples per factorial permutation (50 filler stimuli of different complexity)
- 3-sentence, declarative design
- Island-type: copula vs. CNP vs. factive
- Gap-type: grammatical (i.e. a control) vs. RP vs. Ø (i.e. a gap)
- Different gap-types in declarative CNP islands
- This is the rope; that...

**Methods**

- Items were recorded by a non-linguistic male native speaker of American English naive to the purpose of the experiment.
- A handful of items contained substantial pauses that were shortened in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2011).
- The experiment was run in Experiment (Becker & Levine 2010).
- The web server executed a multistage random sample of materials for each participant choosing a total of 28 items: 18 target items and 10 fillers.
- Each participant heard only one stimulus from any given contextual theme, (e.g. a man escaping prison with a rope...)
- Acceptability judgments were collected with a 5-point Likert scale.
- Participants practiced rating a filler item and answering a comprehension question about it.
- 188 native speakers of American English completed the survey with comprehension question accuracy 88%.

**Controls**

- Two ways to think about “rescuing effects”:
  1. Grammaticality (measured by ratings) and
  2. Parsability (measured by comprehension)

- Using novel methodology, this study confirms previous findings: RPs do not improve the grammaticality of island violations in English. RPs are not more grammatical than gaps.
- Participants answer comprehension questions about stimuli with gaps and stimuli with RPs as accurately as they do controls. RPs are not easier to understand than gaps.

**Discussion**

**Interpretation of Results**

- Contra popular belief, resumption in English does not ameliorate island violations.
- Therefore it is not a syntactic strategy for establishing A-‘binding relationships.
- But speakers still use RPs.
- English RPs do not fix derivational problems, but are used to track coreference by the speaker, for the speaker.

**Future Research**

We predict that English RPs should be better where establishing coreference is more likely:

1. **Subjects**: Subjects are ‘privileged’ with respect to cross-clausal coreference (Keenan 1976 a.o.), confirmed by experimental results (Han et al. 2012).
2. **Distance**: The need to mark coreference overtly increases with distance (Fretheim et al. 1996). Deeper embedding increases RP acceptability is confirmed (Alexeopolou & Keller 2007, Heestand et al 2011).
3. **Causality**: Causal adjuncts as opposed to adjuncts which describe concomitant, unrelated events, facilitate coreference (Kehler 2002).
4. **Pitch**: Pitch could be used to manipulate the likelihood of coreference between an RP and its antecedent (Kühnlein et al 2010). Cosing full circle: are all these comprehension tracking properties also present in A-bar moved RPs as in Lebanese Arabic, or is that type of resumption completely different?

**References**


Boersma, P. & Weenink, D. 2011. Praat, version 5.3. 0.22. Dynamic phonetics and speech analysis, the PHOENIX laboratory, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.


Baayen, R. H. et al 2010)., confirmed by experiment results (Han et al. 2012).