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THE SUPERFICIAL NATURE OF
ANAPHORIC ISLAND
CONSTRAINTS

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In his important paper "Anaphoric Islands", Paul Postal investigated the nature of the ungrammaticality of such sentences as those in (1).*

- (1) a. *Max is an orphan, and mine are dead, too.
b. *Jane is a beautiful brunette, but it's falling out.
c. $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Britain's}_i \\ \text{*The British}_i \end{array} \right\}$ attempt to justify herself_i was repellent.

Postal shows that what is involved in all the cases he investigates is a constraint which prohibits, roughly speaking, NP's "inside" words (or lexical items) from being anaphorically linked to pronouns. But he does not discuss the question of the stage of derivations at which this constraint is to be stated. It is the purpose of this squib to show that the constraint should only be stated in such a way as to mark as ungrammatical certain sentences *in whose surface structures the relevant pronouns actually appear*. It is perfectly possible for pronouns to appear in the course of a derivation which refer to NP's "inside" words, as long as these pronouns do not eventually appear in surface structures.

An example which shows this clearly is (2):

- (2) I approve of America's attempt to justify herself_i, but I don't approve of the British_j attempt $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{to}^1 \\ \text{*to justify herself}_j \end{array} \right\}$.

In Ross (1969), I argued that NP's like *Britain's_i attempt to justify herself_i* underlie NP's like *Britain's attempt to*,

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¹ All speakers I have asked accept (2) if it contains *the British attempt*. Some speakers find *the British attempt to* awkward, which means that, in their dialects, the rule of VP Deletion will (somehow) have to be made sensitive to the difference between preceding noun and preceding verb (presumably, all speakers accept . . . *but I won't attempt to* in the appropriate contexts). This further refinement is a matter of no consequence for the present discussion. It would not be difficult to show that NP's like *the British attempt* must also be formed from a fuller remote structure NP in which an object follows *attempt*, an object which is later deleted. At any rate, the discussion is somewhat beside the point, since the existence of speakers for whom *the British attempt to* is grammatical is sufficient to prove that anaphoric island constraints limit only superficial anaphora.

which arise by the application of VP Deletion to the phrase *justify herself*. Thus the ungrammatical variant of (2) underlies the grammatical one, a fact which argues that the anaphoric island constraint which accounts for the ungrammaticality of the ill-formed sentence in (2) and of the sentences in (1) is only triggered by pronouns which are present in surface structure.

This fact has wider ramifications. One of the central issues which divides the generative semantic theory of linguistic structure² from interpretive theories³ is the claim made by the former theory that lexical items have complex internal structure⁴—i.e. that *orphan* “contains” *parents*, that *brunette* “contains” *hair*, etc. Under this theory, one would expect the NP’s which are “contained” in lexical items to participate in anaphoric relationships as freely as more visible NP’s. In interpretive theories, on the other hand, lexical items have no internal syntactic structure; the theory thus predicts that no pronouns should ever be able to refer to NP’s “inside” lexical items, because allegedly, for syntactic purposes, such NP’s are “not there”.

The facts of at least some dialects of English are thus directly at variance with interpretive theories, since in these dialects, pronouns at stages of derivations prior to surface structure can refer to NP’s “inside” words. Since such anaphora is compatible with generative semantics (though no general explanation of the fact that an output condition blurs the regularity is as yet available), but not with interpretive theories, the anaphoric island phenomena discovered by Postal can be seen to constitute a strong argument for generative semantics.

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² Cf. Postal (1970) for an exposition of this theory.

³ Cf. Chomsky (1970) for an exposition of an interpretive theory.

⁴ Cf. Postal (1970).