

Left-Branch Extraction in English: A CGEL-Based Stress Test

(exploratory note)

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1 Aim

We examine why English resists left-branch extraction (LBE) from noun phrases when described in the CGEL architecture ($NP \rightarrow DetP$ in determiner function + Nom). Goal: stress-test non-generative explanations; if the account collapses under counterexamples, we discard it. No claim of proof.

2 CGEL scaffolding

In CGEL the NP consists of a Determinative Phrase (DetP) plus a nominal (Nom). The nominal contains the head noun with its complements and pre-/post-head modifiers. Possessive/genitives are DetP in determiner function; prenominal adjectives sit inside Nom before the head noun.

3 Multiple live hypotheses (meant to be broken)

- H1. **Relevance/QUD:** Bare LBE fails because adjectives/determiners are rarely the primary QUD target; pied-piping foregrounds the whole nominal. *Torpedo:* find contexts where the modifier alone is the QUD and bare LBE is still rejected.
- H2. **Prosodic adjacency/edge:** English requires modifier–noun adjacency and lacks a prosodic edge for stranded modifiers; pied-piping keeps adjacency. *Torpedo:* show a prosodically acceptable LBE that speakers like.
- H3. **Recoverability/morpho-cues:** With no case/agreement on modifiers/Det, a stranded noun isn't linkable. *Torpedo:* add overt cues (classifier, agreement play) and see if LBE stays bad.

- H4. **Packaging integrity (CGEL NP as minimal unit)**: English moves or elides DetP+Nom as a package; breaking it is illicit. *Torpedo*: find a productive English construction that leaves an overt noun while extracting its left branch.
- H5. **Linearization cost**: LBE disrupts required order; freer-order languages avoid the cost. *Torpedo*: show an English construction that tolerates similar disruption but still bans LBE.
- H6. **Freezing/movement history**: Prior NP movement freezes interior; baseline LBE is already bad, topicalisation worsens it. *Torpedo*: topicalised DPs where pied-piping is perfect.
- H7. **Usage/frequency**: LBE is rare in input; gradient unacceptability reflects expectations. *Torpedo*: exposure/training that fails to improve LBE.
- H8. **Determiner semantics**: Wh-determiners need an overt domain; stranding the noun breaks presuppositions. *Torpedo*: a determiner whose semantics is satisfied by a stranded noun yet LBE is still bad.

None of these is assumed decisive; keep all on the table until a clear counterexample collapses them.

4 English data: baseline and probes (for all hypotheses)

4.1 Canonical bad LBE

- a) ***How expensive** did they buy a car? (adjectival LBE from Nom)
- b) ***Whose** did you read book? (possessor/genitive LBE from DetP)

4.2 Pied-piping successes

- a) **How expensive a car** did they buy?
- b) **Whose book** did you read?

4.3 Prosody and QUD attempts

- a) Context QUD: “Which *color*?”
Which red did you buy car? (still crashes)
- b) Contrastive stress: **HOW** expensive did they buy a car? (judged odd → at best marginally improved, not acceptable)

4.4 Possessor vs adjective asymmetry

Even in strongly contrastive contexts, possessor LBE seems worse than adjective LBE:

- a) ***Whose** did you dent car? (DetP extracted)
- b) ??**How heavy** did you lift box? (slightly less awful for some speakers)

4.5 Freezing/topicalisation

- a) *That car, **how expensive a** ___ did they buy? (pied-piping degraded after topicalisation)
- b) *That car, **how expensive** did they buy ___? (bare LBE still impossible)

5 Known slippery cases (keep testing)

- **Echo/reprise:** *You bought WHICH car?* — acceptable but a different construction (does not license information LBE).
- **Sluicing/ellipsis:** *They bought a car, but I don't know how expensive.* Noun is unpronounced; does not show LBE.
- **Fragments/headlines/appositives:** English allows bare nouns or modifiers here; need to check whether any genuinely pronounce the noun and extract the modifier in an information question.
- **Idioms/light nouns:** no solid cases where the adjective alone carries the idiom and could license extraction.
- **Prosody:** no solid reports of contrastive-stress fully rescuing LBE; if found, prosodic-edge accounts gain weight over packaging.

6 What would falsify the account?

- F1. Naturally occurring English examples where only the adjective/determiner is extracted in an information question and judged fully acceptable (not echo, not metalinguistic).
- F2. Clear evidence that strong contrastive prosody alone makes bare LBE acceptable across speakers.
- F3. Contexts where the modifier is the QUD target and bare LBE rates on par with pied-piping.

- F4. Any case where possessor LBE patterns like pied-piping in acceptability (would undercut the foreground clash claim for DetP).

7 Predictions per hypothesis (English)

- **Relevance/QUD:** modifier-targeted contexts improve LBE slightly but never reach pied-piping; neutral contexts stay bad.
- **Prosodic edge:** contrastive-stress variants should rate better than flat prosody; true rescue would favour this account.
- **Recoverability/morpho-cues:** adding overt cues (e.g., classifier-like of-phrases) should improve LBE; if not, cue hypothesis weakens.
- **Packaging integrity:** no pronounced noun with extracted left branch in ordinary clauses; only pied-piping/ellipsis acceptable.
- **Linearization:** anything that breaks modifier–noun adjacency stays bad; if an adjacency-violating construction is good, this account weakens.
- **Freezing:** topicalised/scrambled DPs degrade even pied-piping; if not, freezing is irrelevant.
- **Usage:** exposure/training might raise ratings marginally; if ratings stay flat, usage is insufficient.
- **Determiner semantics:** determiners that permit domain drop (e.g., *which ones*) should be better than bare *which*+ overt noun; if not, semantics isn't the blocker.

8 Where this could break

Any robust, context-independent good LBE in English (non-echo, non-ellipsis) sinks packaging/recoverability accounts. Likewise, if prosody or QUD alone fully licenses bare LBE, prosodic/relevance factors outrank packaging. If adjacency-violating constructions are fine, linearization is not the issue. We should be prepared to drop whatever fails first.

9 Open tasks

- O1. Catalogue English near-miss cases (literary, dialect, fragments) and classify them.
- O2. Compare bare LBE vs pied-piping across determiners vs adjectives vs quantifiers.
- O3. Look for idiom/light-noun cases where the modifier might carry the idiom.

- O4. Identify modifier-QUD contexts and check whether pied-piping still wins.
- O5. (Crossing to other hypotheses) Note any adjacency-breaking constructions that are grammatical; see if they correlate with better LBE.

10 Takeaway

Multiple hypotheses stay on the table; none is claimed decisive. The note is a checklist for where to attack: find genuine English LBE successes or show that prosody/QUD overrides packaging, and we jettison the failing story.