

Island effects with infinitival hanging topics

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Romance hanging topics are uncontroversially analysed as constituents that are base-generated above the matrix CP level (Cinque 1977, 1990, Alexiadou 2006, López 2009, among many others). This account assumes that there is no narrow syntactic operation connecting the hanging topic to the position where it is interpreted within the clause; instead, this connection is taken to rely on an anaphoric relation with a resumptive element, and on discourse-related mechanisms.

One property of hanging topics that motivates this approach is their insensitivity to island restrictions. As the following Spanish examples show, the clause-internal correlate of the hanging topic can be within a relative clause, e.g., (1c), or an adjunct, e.g., (1d).

- (1) a. Con respecto a la canción, la escucho todos los días.
‘As for the song, I listen to it every day.’
- b. Con respecto a la canción, sé que la escuchas todos los días.
‘As for the song, I know you listen to it every day.’
- c. Con respecto a la canción, conozco al hombre que la compuso.
‘As for the song, I know the man who composed it.’
- d. Con respecto a la canción, suelo bailar mientras la escucho.
‘As for the song, I usually dance while I listen to it.’

As seen, hanging topics in this language may be introduced by prepositional expressions like *con respecto a* ‘with respect to’ (e.g., Zubizarreta 1999, Olarrea 2012). Elements like these may also introduce infinitival topics, e.g., (2). In this new paradigm, the sentences in which the correlate of the hanging topic is within an island do exhibit degradation.

- (2) a. Con respecto a cantar, lo hago todos los días.
‘As for singing, I do it every day.’
- b. Con respecto a cantar, sé que lo haces todos los días.
‘As for singing, I know you do it every day.’
- c. ?? Con respecto a cantar, conozco al hombre que lo hizo.
‘As for singing, I know the man who did it.’
- d. ?? Con respecto a cantar, suelo bailar mientras lo hago.
‘As for singing, I usually dance while I do it.’

The contrast between (1) and (2) shows that the traditional observation that hanging topics do not display island restrictions must be qualified: it seems to hold for nominal hanging topics,

but not for infinitival ones. In particular, the pattern indicates that sensitivity/insensitivity to islands is not a property of the hanging topic construction *per se*, but of the type of phrase functioning as a hanging topic.

In principle, the unacceptability of (2c) and (2d) suggests that some constituent moves when the hanging topic contains an infinitive. A solution along these lines can be advanced by adopting aspects of Thoms & Walkden’s (2018) analysis of English vP-preposing (e.g., *eat the pies, he did*). According to them, vP-preposing involves a base-generated vP in Spec,C that triggers phonological deletion of its counterpart within the clause. To ensure that the preposed vP is interpreted as controlled by the relevant clause-internal subject, they propose that a null operator *Op* is generated within the subject DP, and then moves to a position above the vP to provide an A-binder for its PRO.

- (3) Op_i [_{vP} PRO_i eat the pies] ... [_{DP} he t_{Op}] did ~~eat the pies~~

An analogous moving operator could be taken to provide A-binders for infinitival hanging topics, e.g., (4). If the subject where the operator is generated is within an island, the sentence is predicted to be unacceptable. This would allow to account for the island effects in (2c) and (2d) without significantly altering the base-generation analysis of hanging topics.

- (4) Op_i [_{PP} con respecto a PRO_i cantar] ... [_{DP} *pro*_{1SG} t_{Op}] lo hago ... cf. (2a)

This solution is not perfect, however, as the island sensitivity of infinitival hanging topics seems to be selective. For instance, the sentence in (5b), which involves a complex NP, is acceptable if the infinitive is interpreted as a contrastive topic. According to the analysis in (4), (5b) is predicted to be unacceptable because the operator should not be able to move outside the complex NP.

- (5) a. Con respecto a la canción, escuché el rumor de que Madonna no la compuso.
As for the song, I heard the rumor that Madonna didn’t compose it.’
b. Con respecto a cantar, escuché el rumor de que Madonna no lo hará más.
As for singing, I heard the rumor that Madonna won’t do it anymore.’

In conclusion, further research is necessary to determine why adjuncts and relative clauses trigger island effects with infinitival hanging topics. If a movement-based account in the line of (4) can be successfully maintained, the phenomenon makes a case against the assumption that no narrow syntactic operation is involved in licensing hanging topics.

References

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