Relative clause subextraction in English

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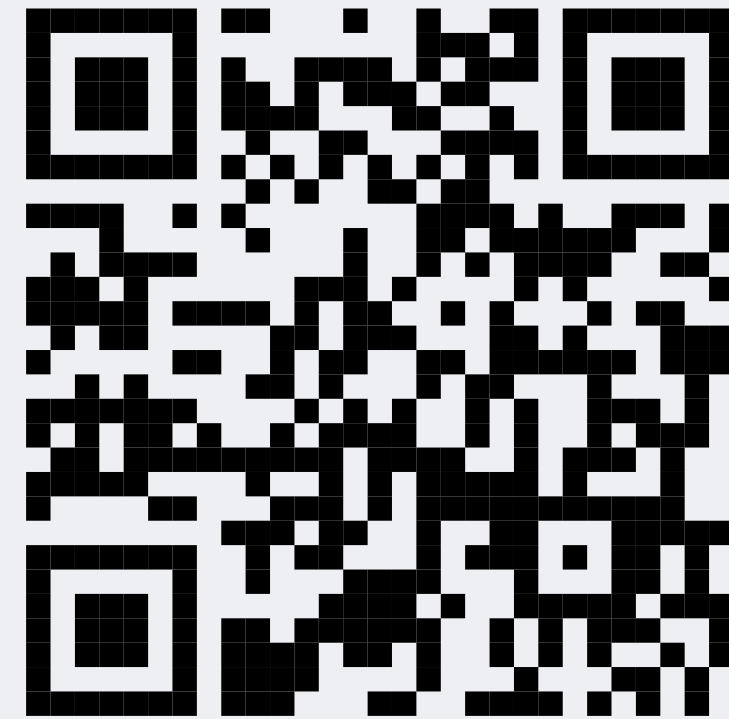
Q: Are English relative clauses always strong islands?

A: No; island effects are substantially reduced in certain environments.

Background

- RCs are "selective" islands in a handful of other languages (subextraction is tolerated in limited environments).
  - ‣ Mainland Scandinavian (Danish [5], Swedish [4], Norwegian [9])
  - ‣ Romance languages [3]
  - ‣ Hebrew [7]
- Environments that facilitate extraction in above languages:
  - ‣ Existential clause
  - ‣ Predicates like *know* (1st pers. subject)
  - ‣ DP predicate (Hebrew)

Why investigate English RCs?

- Limited earlier work identified unusually acceptable examples of subextraction that seem parallel to examples from the above languages.

Existential

This is the child who there is nobody who is willing to accept ○ . [6]

Predicates like *know*

That's one trick that I've known a lot of people who've been taken in by ○ . [2]

DP predicate

Isn't that the song that Paul and Stevie were the only ones who wanted to record ○ ? [2]

References

[1] Bhatt, R. [2] Chung, S. & McCloskey, J. [3] Cinque, G. [4] Engdahl, E. [5] Erteschik-Shir, N. & Lappin, S. [6] Kuno, S. [7] Sichel, I. [8] Sprouse, J., Wagers, M.W., & Phillips, C. [9] Taraldsen, K.T.

EXPERIMENT 1 (*n*=46)

Finite relative clauses // Acceptability judgment // 3×2×2 design

ENVIRONMENT: object, predicate, existential
STRUCTURE: [non-island], { island }
LENGTH: short, long

object
Who ○ thinks that Courtney saw [that only one art collector bid on this painting] ?
Which painting do you think that Courtney saw [that only one art collector bid on ○] ?
Who ○ thinks that Courtney saw { the only art collector who bid on this painting } ?
Which painting do you think that Courtney saw { the only art collector who bid on ○ } ?

predicate
Who ○ thinks that Courtney believes [that only one art collector bid on this painting] ?
Which painting do you think that Courtney believes [that only one art collector bid on ○] ?
Who ○ thinks that Courtney believes that she is { the only art collector who bid on this painting } ?
Which painting do you think that Courtney believes that she is { the only art collector who bid on ○ } ?

existential
Who ○ thinks that there is only one art collector [bidding on this painting] ?
Which painting do you think that there is only one art collector [bidding on ○] ?
Who ○ thinks that there is only one art collector { who bid on this painting } ?
Which painting do you think that there is only one art collector { who bid on ○ } ?
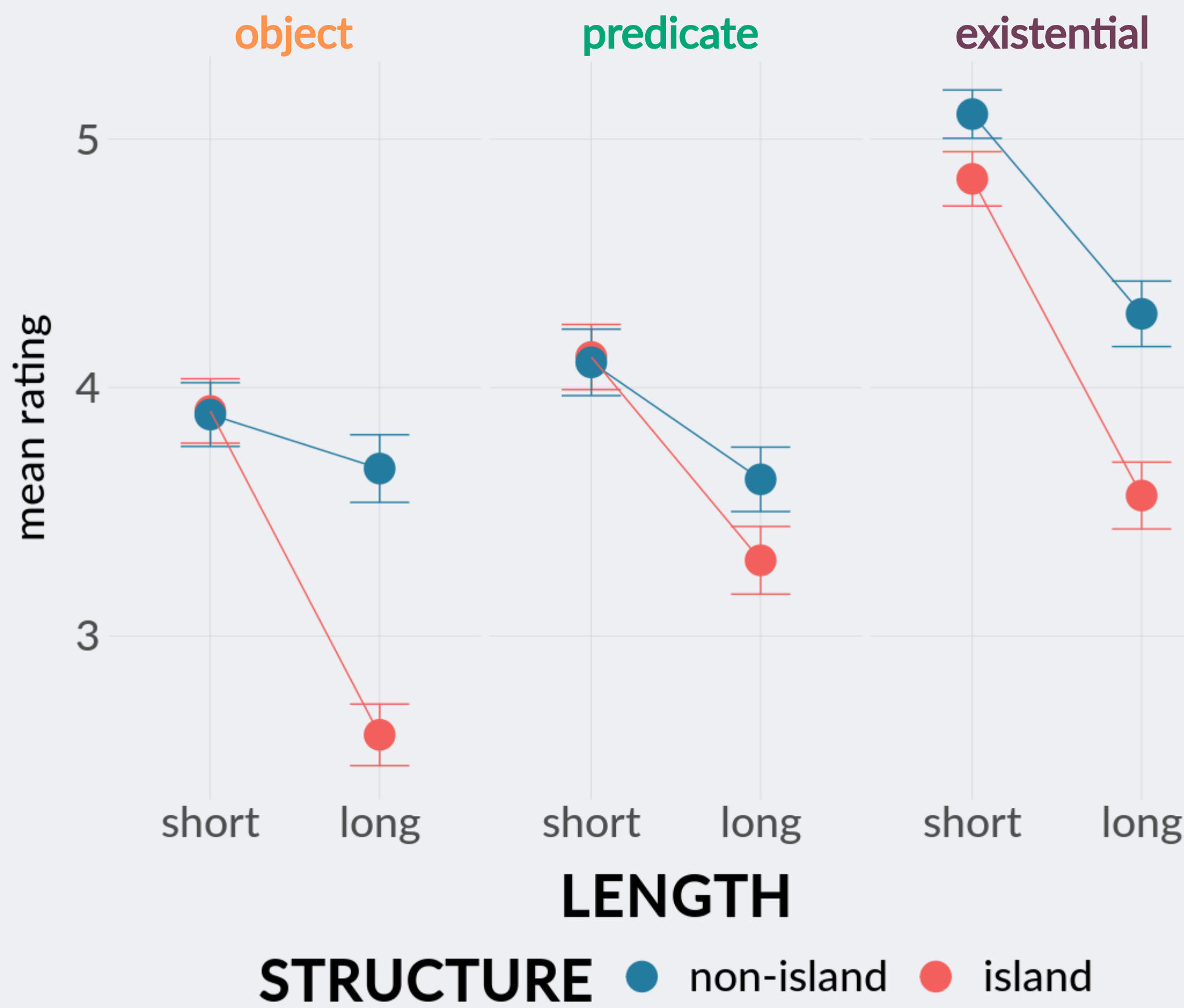
Findings

Island effects in object (*p*<0.001) and existential (*p*=0.038), but not in predicate conditions (*p*=0.124).

Differences-in-differences (DD) scores used as a proxy for island strength [8] indicate that RCs are over twice as "porous" in predicate and existential environments than in object environments.

DD scores

object	0.62
predicate	0.16
existential	0.26

EXPERIMENTS 2 & 3 (*n*=46)

Infinitival relative clauses // Acceptability judgment // Exp. 2 = 2×2×2 // Exp. 3 = 2×2

ENVIRONMENT: predicate, existential
STRUCTURE: [non-island], { island }
LENGTH: short, long

ENVIRONMENT: object, predicate
DEPENDENCY: referential, movement

Exp. 2

predicate
Who ○ thinks that Mary believes [only one senator to have watched this show] ?
Which show do you think that Mary believes [only one art senator to have watched ○] ?
Who ○ thinks that Mary believes that she is { the only senator to have watched this show } ?
Which show do you think that Mary believes that she is { the only senator to have watched ○ } ?

existential
Who ○ thinks that Mary believes that there is only one senator [watching this show] ?
Which show do you think that Mary believes that there is only one senator [watching ○] ?
Who ○ thinks that Mary believes that there is only one senator { to have watched this show } ?
Which show do you think that Mary believes that there is only one senator { to have watched ○ } ?

Exp. 3

object
Bill Nye_i claims that Vivian interviewed the only scientist to have condemned him_i .
Bill Nye is someone that Vivian interviewed the only scientist to have condemned ○ .

predicate
Bill Nye_i claims that Vivian is the only scientist to have condemned him_i .
Bill Nye is someone that Vivian is the only scientist to have condemned ○ .
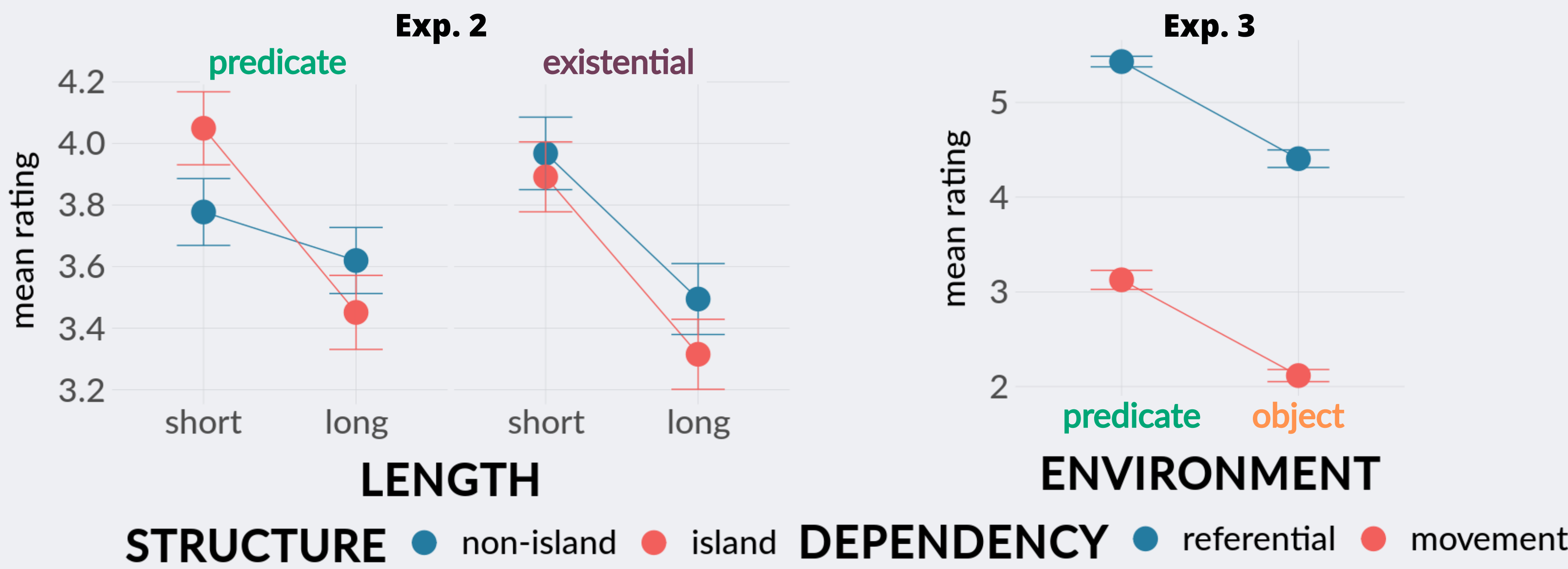
Findings & Conclusions

Exp. 2: No island effects for infinitival RCs in either the predicate or existential environment (*p*=0.563).

Exp. 3: Equal decrement in predicate and object (*p*=0.673) → infinitival RCs unselectively allow extraction [1].

Finite RCs in English are more tolerant of subextraction in environments that facilitate subextraction in Hebrew, Scandinavian, and Romance languages. A unified analysis is warranted (in terms of either structure of processing).