

# Weak Island Effects and Obviation in Infinitival Complements to Adjectives\*

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Certain adjectives, e.g., *tough*, *hard* and *easy*, may take an infinitival complement. The infinitive patterns with *weak islands*, such as negative islands, in disallowing extraction of a subset of *wh*-expressions, such as degree and manner *how*. Extraction of *which*-questions, on the other hand, is possible. This is illustrated in (1) for negative islands, and in (2) for infinitival complements.

- (1) a. Which bicycle<sub>*i*</sub> didn't John fix *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
b. \*How<sub>*i*</sub> didn't Ed fix this bicycle *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
c. \*How high<sub>*i*</sub> didn't Laura jump *t<sub>i</sub>*?
- (2) a. Which bicycle<sub>*i*</sub> is it easy to fix *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
b. \*How<sub>*i*</sub> is it easy to fix this bicycle *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
c. \*How high<sub>*i*</sub> is it hard to jump *t<sub>i</sub>*?

Building on work on degree questions by Rullmann (1995), Beck and Rullmann (1999) Fox and Hackl (2007), Abrusán (2007, 2014) observes that certain quantificational expressions obviate the weak island effects in (1). For example, an existential modal within the scope of negation, as shown in (3).

- (3) a. ?How<sub>*i*</sub> isn't Ed allowed to fix this bicycle *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
b. ?How high<sub>*i*</sub> isn't Laura allowed to jump *t<sub>i</sub>*?

Abrusán takes these facts to favour a semantic approach to weak island effects. Here I observe that either an existential modal above the adjective, as in (4), or the superlative form, as in (5), obviate the weak island effects in (2).

- (4) a. ?How<sub>*i*</sub> would it be easy to fix this bicycle *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
b. ?How high<sub>*i*</sub> would it be easy to jump *t<sub>i</sub>*?
- (5) a. How<sub>*i*</sub> is it easiest to fix this bicycle *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
b. How high<sub>*i*</sub> is it easiest to jump *t<sub>i</sub>*?

This suggests that the weak island effects in (2) should receive a semantic explanation. It is unclear however whether the specific approach advocated by Abrusán can be extended to these cases; I am not aware of other cases of obviation via the superlative form.

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\*This is an unpublished draft – please drop me a line before citing!

One further consequence is an explanation for the lack of scope reconstruction in *tough*-constructions. It has long been observed that the subject in a *tough*-construction cannot reconstruct for scope (Postal 1974), as shown in (6a). This is mysterious according to the view on which the matrix subject is derived via a step of A-movement from the embedded infinitive (Hicks 2009). This is because an A-moved subject can receive a reconstructed reading, as illustrated in (6b).

- (6) a. A doctor is difficult to see \_\_\_\_\_. (\*difficult > a doctor)  
 b. A doctor<sub>i</sub> is likely *t<sub>i</sub>* to see you soon. (likely > a doctor)

If the infinitival complement in the *tough*-construction is a weak island, the lack of scope reconstruction (6a) collapses into the well-known generalization that weak islands block scope reconstruction (Cresti 1995). We can show that the gapped infinitive is indeed a weak island.

- (7) a. Which channel<sub>i</sub> is the game easy to watch \_\_\_ on *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
 b. \*how<sub>i</sub> is the game easy to watch \_\_\_ *t<sub>i</sub>*?  
 c. How<sub>i</sub> is the game easiest to watch \_\_\_?

This accounts for why reconstructed readings are disallowed, and this can no longer be considered an argument against a movement derivation.

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