Subject island variation across dependency types in Spanish and Italian

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The Bilingual Mind

Introduction

Subjects (S) are islands in English, i.e. no dependency can be held between a filler and a gap contained in a subject. However, it has been claimed that in Italian and Spanish subjects are not islands (Rizzi,1982; Torrego, 1984).

(1) a. ***Who** does [$_{SUBJECT}$ a picture of __] hang on the wall?
b. **Who** did you see [$_{OBJECT}$ a picture of __]?

In an acceptability judgment task (AJT) using a factorial definition of islands, Sprouse et al. (2016) found that S islands in Italian vary depending on the type of filler-gap dependency:

- in *wh*-questions (WH) (2), S are islands
- in relative clauses (RC) (3), S are not islands.

This unexpected pattern cannot be explained by any account of island effects.

(2) **Di chi** pensi che [il quadro __] raffiguri la nascita di Venere?
'Who do you think the painting of depicts the birth of Venus?'

(3) Ho incontrato **il giornalista del quale** pensi che [l'articolo __] abbia causato il licenzamiento del direttore.
'I met the journalist who you think that the article of caused the firing ot the director.'

We observed that in (3), a gap can be posited before reaching the island. This confound may have led to the conclusion that subjects are not islands in Italian RC-dependencies.

THE PRESENT STUDY

We tested subject islands in Spanish and Italian using a factorial definition of islands. The aim was:

- To check whether subjects are islands in Spanish and Italian.
- To check whether RC-dependencies and WH-dependencies behave differently.

Factorial definition of islands

GAP POSITION (SUBJECT | OBJECT) and **TYPE OF STRUCTURE** (NON-ISLAND | ISLAND)

GAP POSITION	+	TYPE OF STRUCTURE	**NON-ISLAND**
GAP POSITION	×	TYPE OF STRUCTURE	**ISLAND**

Methods

- Acceptabillity judgment task (AJT) on Ibex Farm
- 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely unacceptable, 7 = completely acceptable)
- Participants were asked to respond following their intuition as native speakers

SPANISH
Exp. 1 (n = 59) – RC-dependencies
Exp. 2 (n = 57) – WH-dependencies

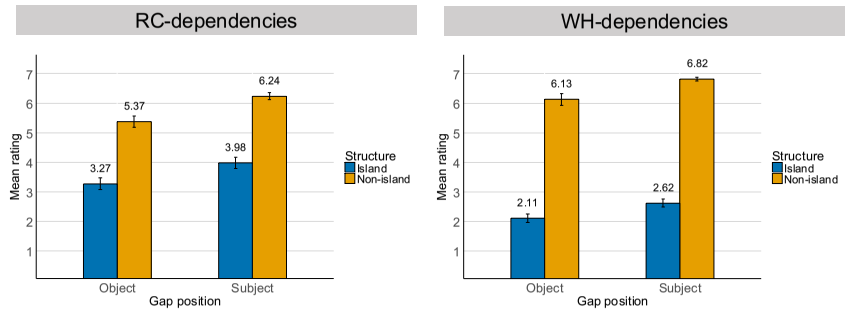
ITALIAN
Exp. 3 (n = 82) – RC-dependencies
Exp. 4 (n = 48) – WH-dependencies

Materials

NON ISLAND	OBJECT	¿**A quién** crees que el alcalde ha acusado __? '**Who** do you think that the mayor accused __?'
	SUBJECT	¿**Quién** crees que __ ha acusado al alcalde? '**Who** do you think __ accused the mayor?'
ISLAND	OBJECT	¿**De quién** crees que el alcalde de Bilbao ha acusado [a varios compañeros __]? **Who** do you think that the mayor of Bilbao accused [some colleagues of __]?'
	SUBJECT	¿**De quién** crees que [algunos compañeros __] han acusado al alcalde de Bilbao? '**Who** do you think [some colleagues of __] accused the mayor of Bilbao?'

Results

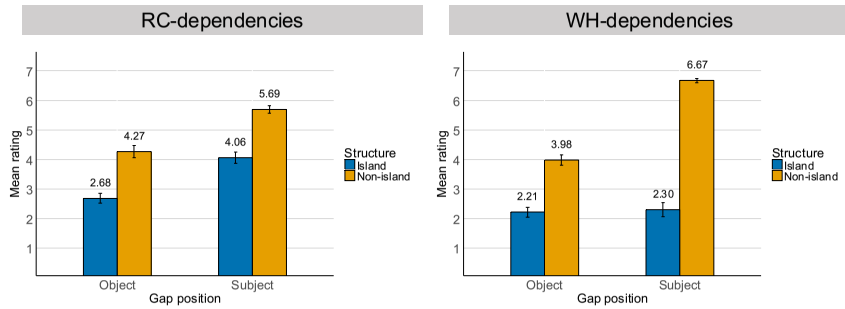
SPANISH



In both **RC** and **WH** dependencies, there is a significant **main effect of GAP POSITION** (all ps<0.001) and a significant **main effect of STRUCTURE** (all ps<0.001).

In either RC and WH dependencies, there is **no** significant **GAP POSITION × STRUCTURE interaction** (all ps<0.001).

ITALIAN



In both **RC** and **WH dependencies**, there is a significant **main effect of GAP POSITION** (all ps<0.001) and a significant **main effect of STRUCTURE** (all ps<0.001).

In **RC** dependencies, we **failed** to find a significant **GAP POSITION × STRUCTURE interaction** (p<0.001). In **WH** dependencies, the **interaction** turned out **significant** (p<0.001)

Summary of the results

	Spanish		Italian	
	RC-dep	WH-dep	RC-dep	WH-dep
GAP POSITION	√	√	√	√
STRUCTURE	√	√	√	√
GAP POSITION × STRUCTURE	×	×	×	√

√ = Significant p-value (p<0.05) × = Non-significant p-value (p>0.05)

In all conditions, we failed to find an interaction in the direction it was predicted by the factorial definition of islands.

Conclusions

1. Subjects are islands in both Spanish and Italian in both RC and WH dependencies.
2. Subject islandhood is moduled by the type of dependency: subject islands are ameliorated in RC-dependencies.
3. Objects are also islands in both Spanish and Italian in both RC and WH dependencies.
4. Because of (3), we failed to find an interaction in the direction predicted by the factorial definition of islands.
5. The present study contributes to enlarge the growing body of evidence concerning the variation of S islands across and within languages

References

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Acknowledgements. This research has been funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (FPU15/05741), the Government of the Basque Country (IT665-13) and the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2015-64183-P).

23rd AMLaP conference, Architectures and Mechanisms of Lang. Processing