

Syntactic Islands

The phenomenon of the syntactic ‘island’ – a clause or structure from which a word cannot be moved – is central to research and study in syntactic theory. This book provides a comprehensive overview of syntactic islands. What are they? How do they arise? Why do they exist? Cedric Boeckx discusses the pros and cons of all the major generative accounts of island effects, and focuses the discussion on whether islands are narrowly syntactic effects, are due to interface factors, or are ‘merely’ performance effects. Thanks to the diversity of island effects, readers are given a unique opportunity to familiarize themselves with all the major research styles and types of analysis in theoretical linguistics and have the chance to reflect on the theoretical implications of concrete natural language examples, allowing them to develop their own synthesis.

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For Youngmi

In gratitude for the love and support through thick and thin

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Preface

This book is an insider's reflection on 'syntactic islands.' I am a syntactician by training, and much of my work, including my Ph.D. dissertation, has revolved around *island effects*: What are they? How do they arise? and Why do they exist?

Most modern grammarians would agree with me if I said that island effects are perhaps the most important empirical finding in modern theoretical linguistics, which I understand to refer to the generative/biolinguistic enterprise, broadly construed.¹

About fifty years ago, syntacticians observed that the sort of seemingly unbounded dependencies ('movement dependencies') that natural languages exhibit appears to be subject to certain restrictions, as the following paradigm illustrates:

- (1) guess *who* John saw ____
 who Mary said that John saw ____
 who Bill believes that Mary said that John saw ____
 who Sue thought that Bill believed that Mary said that John saw ____
- (2) guess **who* John saw Harry and ____
 **who* Mary contested the claim that Bill saw ____
 **who* Bill arrived after Mary said that John saw ____
 **who* Sue met the man who believed that Mary said that John saw ____

Some of the sentences in (1) may sound a bit baroque, but there is no denying that native speakers of English can produce and understand them effortlessly. By contrast, the sentences in (2) strike the same speakers as distinctly odd, un-English, unacceptable. It's not the case that they sound strange or foreign (all the words in them are part of a native speaker of English's vocabulary). Nor is it difficult to see what they are meant to express. They are all requests for information of the sort one finds (in a different discourse context) in (3):

- (3) Tell me again: John saw Harry and *who*?!
 Mary contested the claim that Bill saw *who*?!
 Bill arrived after Mary said that John saw *who*?!
 Sue met the man who believed that Mary said that John saw *who*!?

Informally speaking, 'island effect' refers to whatever happens in (2) that makes these sentences unacceptable. For John R. ('Haj') Ross, the linguist who, with characteristic word flair, came up with the very term *island*, islands were structural domains that impose constraints on certain grammatical operations, the image being that of syntactic elements marooned on certain portions of the sentence.

This book is meant to provide an overview of the major views that linguists have entertained in this domain of research, and also to point to the sort of answers that appear to be more promising based on the evidence currently available and the stage of conceptual development that theoretical linguistics is in.

This is, to say the least, no easy task. Islands have figured prominently in virtually all the major stages of development of linguistic theory since the 1970s. The sophisticated analyses that have been put forth in order to capture island effects offer perhaps the strongest case for a rich, abstract, domain-specific mental module for language ('Universal Grammar'). In addition, because the structures that appear to give rise to island effects are quite rare in everyday speech, certainly quite rare in child directed speech, island constraints offer a classic case of poverty of stimulus (no wonder the most widely discussed illustration of poverty of stimulus, Chomsky's **Is the man who __ tall is happy?*, involves an island violation), and thus raise serious learnability issues.

It is something of an understatement to say that the sort of constraints Ross uncovered has proven to be one of the most productive areas of research in linguistics. The size of the literature on islands is truly overwhelming, not only in terms of theoretical proposals that have been put forth to account for them, but also in terms of data, for the level of generality at which Ross and Chomsky formulated constraints on transformations made it possible to start a new era in comparative syntax: once extracted from their specific constructions, Rossian constraints became the basis for cross-linguistic comparisons. As a result we now have available extremely detailed descriptions of how general locality conditions interact with the subtle, and not so subtle, differences across languages.

For this reason alone, I could not possibly intend to capture everything we know about islands in this book, so I decided to be more pragmatic and offer something that I had the capacity to write and that, in my opinion, would be useful in the current context of linguistic theory. Accordingly, what the reader of this book will find in the chapters that follow is not a 'summa,' it's far less than an encyclopedia on islands, it's much more modest, something that reflects the limitations (and, I want to be honest, the theoretical inclination) of the

author. I have decided to offer a guide to how linguists (not only syntacticians) have come to think about islands, and what they currently think islands will turn out to be. Accordingly, the reader will find little in terms of new data, indeed, there will be relatively few data points explicitly discussed here. Instead, the reader will be introduced to core empirical generalizations and a comprehensive discussion of the theoretical significance that researchers have ascribed to these generalizations. Put differently, the overarching concern in this book will be on the architecture of the language faculty as seen from the unique perspective offered by island effects: what do these effects tell us about the nature of syntax and the systems that the syntactic component interacts with? Put yet another way: why should there be islands?; and why precisely these islands (and not equally conceivable others)?

I thought this focus would be useful and rewarding because, due to the centrality of island phenomena, I believe that the story I tell in this book traces the history of the field, it reflects the various styles of analysis that have come and gone (and come back!), the types of answers favored at one point, but ignored, or dismissed at other times, the avenues that once looked more promising but now seem doomed (only to be revived later), and also because it allows me to highlight what remains to be understood.

It is true that the architectural concerns I took as the organizing principles in writing this book can be said to be ‘minimalist’ in the sense that the discussion centers around why-questions of the sort that defines minimalism (see Boeckx 2006), but readers who are skeptical about the specific lines of approach developed under the rubric of linguistic minimalism these days should not dismiss this book off-hand. As Noam Chomsky has stressed on numerous occasions, minimalism *as a program* is fairly theory-neutral, and the questions that define this program arise, and are of interest, no matter which particular technical idiom one writes in. Indeed, I have tried to be as theory-neutral as possible in the pages that follow. As a matter of fact, readers will find many critical remarks concerning mainstream minimalist approaches to islands in Chapter 3.

I also would like to point out that the material on islands is so huge that I had to be highly selective at times, especially when it came to sketching what looked to me like promising avenues for future research. Inevitably, in such places, I have favored views that are close to my own reflections on islands, though I have tried to point to the limitations of my own analyses as much as I could. I ask for the reader’s forgiveness if he/she thinks that I have indulged in too much self-citation in some parts of this work.

Having said this, the reader should rest assured: I think that I have managed to represent virtually all the major theoretical positions on islands, though perhaps not in an orthodox or chronological fashion. I have favored a more thematic approach. And I have tried to be eclectic. As I hope the text makes abundantly clear, I think that the correct approach to islands is inherently pluralist. The empirical landscape is so complex and varied that I'm almost sure that every theoretical proposal about islands will turn out to be right about something. The problem with most proposals is that they all too often claim to be right about everything.

By the end of this book I am confident that the reader will be familiar with the shape of each major theoretical proposal concerning islands, with all the main arguments in favor of each, and also all the counterarguments that can be found in the literature (and all those I could think of while writing!).

However, let me emphasize that this is not a textbook: though the reader will gain acquaintance with all the theoretical landmarks in the domain of islands, the discussion presupposes a fair amount of background knowledge. I have not sought to scrutinize or delve into all the technical terms that I used if they did not immediately pertain to islands. All of them, I'm sure, can be found in standard textbooks on syntax. I have tried to keep the technical discussion to a minimum, only using what I thought was necessary to reveal the major insights behind the approaches I was discussing. If the reader wants more technical detail, I urge him/her to turn to the primary literature. What this book aims for is to give the reader enough information for him/her to be able to see through the technical details and interpret/understand the theoretical content and import of the claims that have been made regarding islands.

This book is structured in a way that would have pleased Hegel: it begins with a thesis, moves to an anti-thesis, and concludes with an attempt at a (more personal) synthesis. I see theories of islands as constantly fluctuating between two extremes: on the one hand, the Einstein-like dream of a final theory (a unified theory of islands), and on the other, the acknowledgement that this Quixotic quest has been populated by mirages (the denial of the existence of syntactic conditions on transformations). Chapter 1 describes the thesis, giving pride of place to the early works on islands by Ross and Chomsky, and emphasizes the early desire to unify all island effects. The chapter also discusses how the dream of a unified theory of islands quickly began to break down in light of ever increasing amounts of data. Chapter 2 presents the anti-thesis, revolving around so-called reductionist

attempts intent to show that there are no syntactic constraints on transformations, and that alleged island effects reduce to processing difficulties. At the end of the chapter, I offer a critique of such accounts, while acknowledging their merits. Chapters 3 and 4 seek to offer a synthesis amidst the more recent ('minimalist') literature on islands, highlighting the differences between derivational theories, which take islands to be constraints on certain rule applications, and representational theories, which take islands to filter out the outputs of certain rule applications. Chapter 3 highlights the limitations of purely syntactic accounts of islandhood, while Chapter 4 stresses the empirical and conceptual virtues of more interface-oriented proposals. Finally, Chapter 5 wraps up the entire volume, highlighting the enduring character of Ross's insights.

Before thanking the people that helped me write this book, let me say a few words about its title. The book is entitled *Syntactic Islands*, not just *Islands*, if only to prevent the book from ending up on the shelves of travel agencies. The adjective *syntactic* was added primarily because I see this book as a modest tribute to the work of John R. Ross, who included the word 'syntax' in the title of his (1967) thesis, and also in the (1986) book version of the latter. As I discuss in Chapter 2, many linguists have come to deny the existence of syntactic constraints underlying island effects, and I certainly don't want the title of the book to be seen as a rejection of this line of research; indeed I hope that this book will be of interest to non-syntacticians as well. If some take offense at the adjective 'syntactic,' I ask them to bear in mind that the islands I am talking about are after all not real islands, so I think it's ok to adopt a title like 'syntactic islands' even if islands turn out not to be really syntactic after all.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This is a good time to make sure you are familiar with the basics of 'A-bar'/'Wh-' movement. Do you know what its major motivations are? Can you easily identify its prototypical landing site?
2. (If you are not yet familiar with the literature on islands at all): Just by looking at the examples in (1), (2), and (3), can you try to guess what may be the source of the unacceptability in (2)?

Acknowledgements

In writing this book I have benefitted from the help of various people and institutions, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them. First and foremost I would like to acknowledge the enormous debt I owe to my teacher, Howard Lasnik, who introduced me to the topic of islands, and made me appreciate the beauty and enduring relevance of classic works like Ross's. I also want to thank Norbert Hornstein for the numerous discussions we have had over the years regarding the nature of island effects, and for his comments on a penultimate draft of the manuscript. Thanks also to Juan Uriagereka, Noam Chomsky, Željko Bošković, Kleantes K. Grohmann, Colin Phillips, Jon Sprouse, Bridget Samuels, Dennis Ott, Hiroki Narita, and the late Jean-Roger Vergnaud for helping me understand various aspects of locality through discussions over the years.

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In organizing the material I have benefitted from the comments I received at conferences dedicated to islands which I was fortunate enough to take part in: The 2008 Mayfest at the University of Maryland, the 2009 conference on minimalist perspectives on locality in Budapest, the workshop on chains at Yokohama National University in 2011 and the 2011 conference on islands at the University of the Basque Country. I am deeply grateful to the organizers for inviting me to these thought-provoking meetings, where I never failed to be reminded of the numerous kinds of approaches one can develop in the context of islands.

And, of course, thanks to Haj Ross.

Acknowledgements

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