Relative clause subextraction in English
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Overview. Finite relative clauses (RCs) are often cited as a prototypical example of strong islands, but this characterization may not be warranted. A number of languages selectively tolerate extraction from RCs—most notably, Mainland Scandinavian languages (Danish [5], Swedish [4], and Norwegian [13]), but also Hebrew [11] and Romance languages [3]. Some patterns emerge from the data: RCs are less island-like when hosted by a DP pivot of an existential predicate or a DP complement of a predicate like *know*; in Hebrew, a non-verbal DP predicate host also facilitates extraction from an embedded RC. Some of the cited works contrast these languages with English, but a few earlier studies [2, 10, 8] identified cases of extraction from English RCs that seem unusually acceptable (1); these examples resemble examples from the aforementioned languages.

(1) a. This is the child who there is nobody who is willing to accept. [8]   **EXISTENTIAL**
    b. This is the one that Bob Wall was the only person who hadn't read. [10]   **DP PREDICATE**
    c. That's one trick that I've known a lot of people who've been taken in by. [2]   **V = *know***

This study provides experimental evidence that English also selectively tolerates extraction from RCs. The results suggest not only that the characterization of English as fundamentally different from the aforementioned languages is incorrect, but that selective toleration of extraction from RCs is a more cross-linguistically robust phenomenon than previously thought.

Experiment 1 (n = 48). Building on Sprouse, Wagers, and Phillips [12], we crossed STRUCTURE (NON-ISLAND, ISLAND) with extraction LENGTH (SHORT, LONG) and ENVIRONMENT of the host DP (transitive OBJECT, non-verbal DP PREDICATE, and EXISTENTIAL); 36 items were made (sample item in Table 2). Ratings data (summarized in Figure 1) were fit to a mixed effects ordinal regression model with a cumulative link (full random effects structure). We found a general island effect (interaction between STRUCTURE and LENGTH; $p < 0.001$). In a by-environment analysis, we found an island effect for the OBJECT ($p < 0.001$) and EXISTENTIAL ($p = 0.0375$) environments, but not for the PREDICATE environment ($p = 0.124$). Difference of differences (DD) scores were calculated per environment and used as a proxy for island strength (the difference between the SHORT conditions was subtracted from the difference between the LONG conditions). DD scores for EXISTENTIAL and PREDICATE were less than half of the OBJECT DD score (see Table 1), suggesting subtantial attenuation of island effects in EXISTENTIAL and PREDICATE environments.

Experiments 2 & 3 (n = 59). The islandhood of infinitival RCs was tested because non-finite islands are sometimes weaker [9, 1, 7]. Exp. 2 (32 items; 8 conditions) tested infinitival RCs in EXISTENTIAL and PREDICATE environments using the length by complexity design. Exp. 3 (24 items; 4 conditions) used a new design crossing DEPENDENCY (REFERENTIAL, MOVEMENT) and ENVIRONMENT (OBJECT, PREDICATE) to allow comparison with infinitival RCs in the OBJECT environment, which was excluded from Exp. 2 due to problematic syntactic ambiguities. In Exp. 2 (Fig. 2), neither environment exhibited an island effect ($p = 0.563$). In Exp. 3 (Fig. 3), the OBJECT environment did not exhibit an island effect ($p = 0.673$), suggesting that infinitival RCs are generally weaker islands.

Discussion. The results from Exp. 1 suggest that English finite RCs selectively tolerate subextraction, in contrast to infinitival RCs, which are generally weak islands (Exps 2 & 3). The results are notable because finite RCs in English are generally viewed as strong islands in any environment. These findings invite a unified analysis of extraction from finite RCs. Following Sichel [11], we suggest that only raising RCs [6] can be extracted from because they lack an external NP layer; that an additional specifier position provides an escape hatch for the extracted constituent; and that the host DP must be existentially non-presupposed, limiting the environments in which subextraction occurs. Further research of the factors influencing non-presupposition is called for.
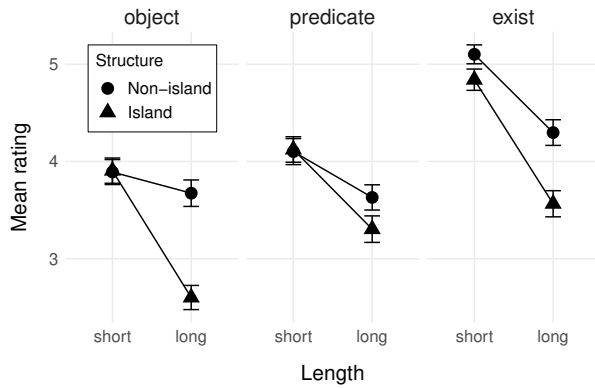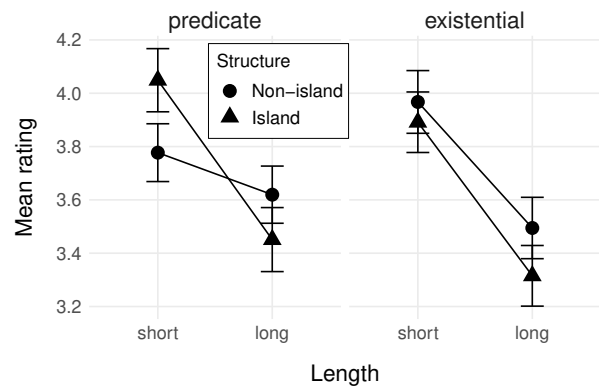
Fig. 1: Mean rtgs for Exp. 1 (err bars = std err)
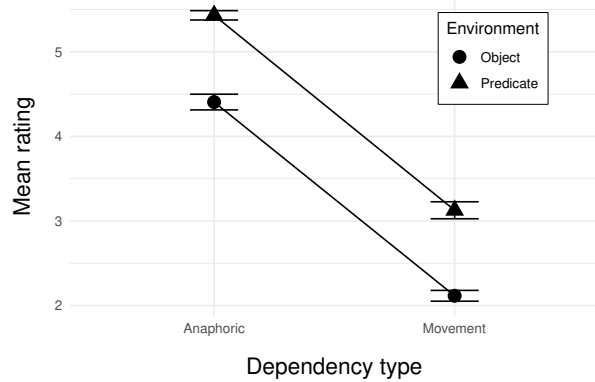

Fig. 2: Mean rtgs for Exp. 2 (err bars = std err)

Fig. 3: Mean rtgs for Exp. 3 (err bars = std err)

Table 1: DD scores (based on *z*-scored ratings of Exp. 1)

ENVIRONMENT	DD score
OBJECT	0.62
PREDICATE	0.16
EXISTENTIAL	0.26

Table 2: Experiment 1 sample item

EN	STR	LN	Sentence
OB	ISL	SH	Who thinks that Courtney saw that only one art collector bid on this painting?
OB	ISL	LG	Which painting do you think that Courtney saw that only one art collector bid on?
OB	N-ISL	SH	Who thinks that Courtney saw the only art collector who bid on this painting?
OB	N-ISL	LG	Which painting do you think that Courtney saw the only art collector who bid on?
PR	ISL	SH	Who thinks that Courtney believes that only one art collector bid on this painting?
PR	ISL	LG	Which painting do you think that Courtney believes that only one art collector bid on?
PR	N-ISL	SH	Who thinks that Courtney believes that she is the only art collector who bid on this painting?
PR	N-ISL	LG	Which painting do you think that Courtney believes that she is the only art collector who bid on?
EX	ISL	SH	Who thinks that there is only one art collector bidding on this painting?
EX	ISL	LG	Which painting do you think that there is only one art collector bidding on?
EX	N-ISL	SH	Who thinks that there is only one art collector who bid on this painting?
EX	N-ISL	LG	Which painting do you think that there is only one art collector who bid on?

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