Discourse Foregrounding Ameliorates Manner-of-Speaking Islands

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Background

Wh-questions formed by extracting the embedded constituent of a manner of speaking (MoS) verb exhibit degraded acceptability.

*E.g., *Who$_i$ did John whisper* [*that Mary met with t$_i$*]*?*

Three accounts for MoS Island Effect

- **Subjacency**: Complements of MoS verbs are complex-NPs rather than CPs, which restrict extraction following the subjacency condition. [1]
- **Verb-frame frequency**: MoS verbs rarely take complement clauses. [2,3]
- **Backgroundedness**: Constituents contained inside the complements of MoS verbs are discourse backgrounded and thus resist movement which requires the fronted element to be foregrounded. [4-6]
  - Previous findings: the magnitude of the MoS Island Effect **correlates** with the backgroundedness of the embedded constituents, as measured by a separate negation test on the matrix clause.

Question
Does altering the discourse backgroundedness of the extracted constituent change the MoS Island Effect?

Predictions

- **Subjacency and Verb-frame frequency account:** Wh-questions that involve extraction of the embedded constituents of a MoS verb are degraded, regardless of the discourse
- **Backgroundedness:** sentences are more acceptable if the embedded constituent is foregrounded in the discourse.

Experiment

Participants
96 native English speakers were recruited on Prolific.

Conditions (12 MoS verbs, 24 fillers)

Verb Focus condition
Hanako said: John didn't **WHISPER** that Mary met with the lawyer.
Scott said: Then who did John whisper that Mary met with?

Embedded Focus condition
Hanako said: John didn't whisper that Mary met with the **LAWYER**.
Scott said: Then who did John whisper that Mary met with?

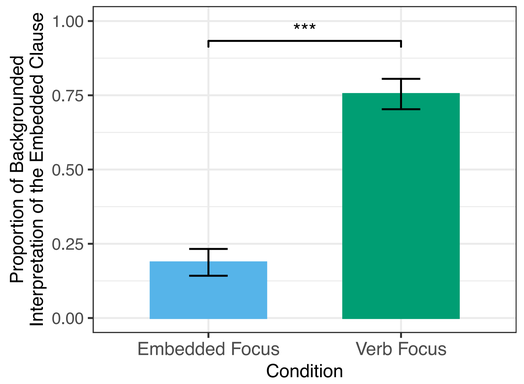
Tasks

Backgroundedness (two-alternative forced choice)
What was Hanako talking about?
a. Who Mary met with, according to John.
b. The way John said that Mary met with the lawyer.

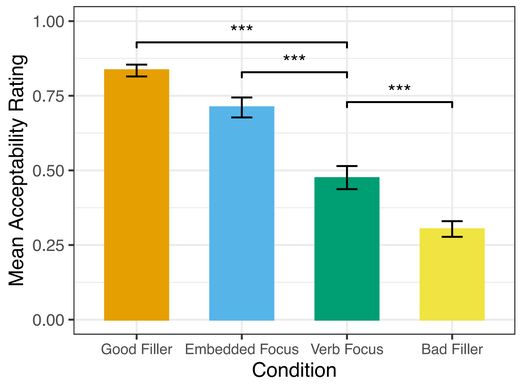
Acceptability (rating on a slider)
How natural/acceptable does Scott's question sound?

Results

Manipulation check



Main analysis



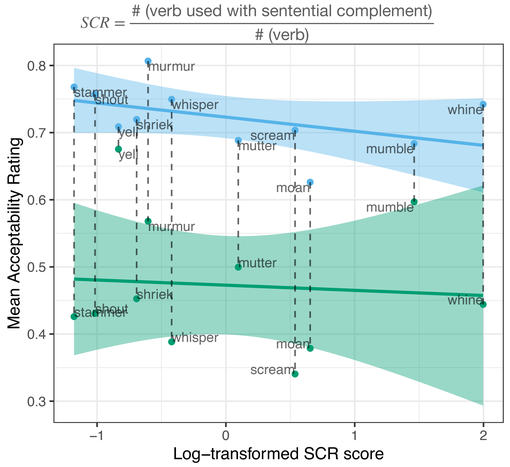
(Left) The embedded object was more backgrounded in the *Verb Focus* condition than in the *Embedded Focus* condition (β=-2.49, SE=0.41, p<0.001).
(Right) Sentence acceptability was higher in the *Embedded Focus* condition than in the *Verb Focus* condition (β=0.24, SE=0.034, t=6.94).

The manipulation succeeded and foregrounding the embedded object attenuates the MoS Island effect.

Exploratory analyses: verb-frame frequency

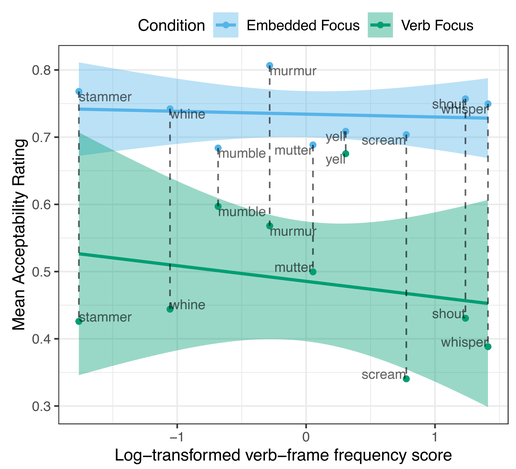
Sentential Complement Ratio (*SCR),* following [7,8]:

$$SCR = \frac{\text{\# (verb used with sentential complement)}}{\text{\# (verb)}}$$



Verb-frame frequency, following [2,3]:

$$P(\text{verb, SC}) = P(\text{verb}) \times P(\text{SC} \mid \text{verb})$$



(Left: SCR) No significant effect of verb-frame frequency (β=-0.017, SE=0.014, t=-1.24) nor an interaction between frequency and focus condition (β=0.009, SE=0.011, t=0.82).

(Right: verb-frame frequency) No significant effect of verb-frame frequency (β=-0.002, SE=0.016, t=-0.13) nor an interaction between frequency and focus condition (β=-0.003, SE=0.013, t=-0.21).

With either measure, there was no significant effect of verb-frame frequency or an interaction between frequency and focus condition, suggesting verb-frame frequency doesn't predict MoS islands effect.

Discussion

- Foregrounding the embedded constituent **ameliorates** the degradedness of extracting that constituent from an MoS island, further supporting the **Backgroundedness** account.
- The difference in acceptability ratings between the two conditions cannot be explained by either the subjacency or the verb-frame frequency account.

References

[1] Snyder (1992). [2,3] Liu, Ryskin, Futrell & Gibson (2019; 2022). [4] Erteschik-Shir (1973). [5] Ambridge & Goldberg (2008). [6] Goldberg (2013). [7] Kothari (2008). [8] Richter & Chaves (2020)

Resources

Experiment, data: https://github.com/pennydy/MOS_Island
Preregistration: https://osf.io/rsza5