

Syntactic islands and focality in Russian

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<https://doi.org/10.36505/ExLing-2023/14/0000/000000>

Abstract

One approach to syntactic islands appeals to information structure as an explanation. It states that islands result from a clash in information structure. Goldberg 2006 formulated it simply:

Backgrounded constructions are islands (BCI)

Ambridge & Goldberg 2008 tested WH-extraction out of the complement of three classes of verbs: light, manner-of-speaking and factive verbs together with their focality/backgroundedness status. As a metric of islandhood, they used the difference score between the acceptability judgements of sentences with and without extraction. As a focality metric, they used the negation test – to which degree negation of the main sentence implies the negation of the complement.

Their analysis shows strong correlation between the focus judgements and the difference score ($r = -0.83$, $p = 0.001$). The correlation between the focus and extraction acceptability judgements is lower, yet still significant ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.05$). So the BCI hypothesis is supported.

In this study, I conducted a similar experiment for Russian. I used the same three classes of verbs, four verbs in each class:

Light verbs: *govorit'* (say), *dumat'* (think), *schitat'* (believe), *pologat'* (suppose)

Manner-of-speaking verbs: *krichat'* (shout), *shepat'* (whisper), *bormotat'* (mumble), *lepetat'* (babble)

Factive verbs: *pomnit'* (remember), *znat'* (know), *radovat'sja* (be glad), *sozhalet'* (regret)

I tried to use the same difference score – a difference of acceptability judgements between a declarative sentence without extraction and an interrogative sentence with extraction:

Dina krichit, chto Seva ispachkal shtany (Dina shouts that Seva has soiled his pants)

Chto Dina krichit, chto Seva ispachkal? (What Dina shouts that Seva has soiled?)

Instead of the negation test, I asked informants to judge how natural the sentence sounds as an answer to the question to the complement of the main verb:

Chto Luba sshila? (What did Luba sew?)

Venya govorit, chto Luba sshila sarafan (Venya says that Luba sewed a sundress)

The experiment was conducted online using Ibex farm. It was advertised in social networks and attracted 515 participants.

Results show a significant correlation between the focus judgements and the extraction acceptability judgements ($r = 0.68$, $p = 0.0144$). The focus score is a good predictor of islandhood. Thus, the BCI hypothesis is supported.

On the other hand, it does not show a significant correlation between the focus judgements and the difference score. This is probably because the extraction out of 'chto' complements in Russian is in general more restricted than the extraction out of 'that' complements in English. The extraction acceptability judgements are near the lower boundary of the range (2-3 out of 7). In such case, the simple difference might not be a good metric to use.

Anyway, the study shows that the focality is not the only factor that plays a role in the islandhood status of the constituent. The focus judgements are about 2 points higher than the extraction acceptability judgements. Speakers would not always accept extraction out of the complement even when they accept the declarative statement as an answer to the question with the focus on the complement. Probably grammatical factors also play a role.