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Mid-sentential Vocatives and Syntactic Islands

The goal of this paper is to provide new evidence that vocatives are structurally integrated into the host phrase. Though the investigation focuses on vocatives, it is likely that the results could be reproduced with other parenthetical phrases. The evidence is drawn from a 128-participant scalar grammaticality judgment survey of English speakers, the results of which show that the mid-sentential placement of vocatives is sensitive to syntactic islands.

Recent work on vocatives in the framework of generative syntax has mostly agreed on the idea that they are syntactically integrated into the host clause by association with a functional head. The majority of these studies have concluded that this functional head should be either above or the highest member of the CP domain (Moro 2003, Hill 2007, Espinal 2013, Hill 2013a, b), while only two have concluded that the vocative functional head must be lower in the CP domain, specifically in the topic domain (Mauck & Zanuttini 2004, Slocum 2010). The results of the present study lend their support to the latter camp.

Slocum (2010) argues that mid-sentential vocatives are derived by phrasal and remnant movement for information structure. For example, a sentence such as *These cookies, Susan, are the best I've ever had* is derived by topicalization of the subject DP to a topic position above the vocative functional head, AddrP (which hosts the vocative, *Susan*). Such an analysis is not possible if AddrP (or an equivalent) is structurally higher than the topic domain (as is argued by the majority camp).

If the analysis presented in Slocum (2010) is correct, vocatives should not be able to interrupt syntactic islands, as such a construction would necessarily be derived by topicalization or focus movement out of that island. Let's consider adjunct islands, for example. It is well known that modifiers cannot be moved out of adjunct clauses, as shown below in (1). Following the analysis in Slocum (2010), this illicit movement would be required for the derivation of the island-interior vocative (2a), the derivation of which is shown in (2b).

- 1) *Tomorrow_i, the owner left early [because he has to work *t_i*]
- 2) a. ?The owner left early because he has to work, Jason, tomorrow.
b. [_{TopP} [_{TP} The owner left early because he has to work *t_j*]_{*i*} [_{AddrP} Jason [_{FocP} tomorrow_{*i*} [_{ForceP} *t_i*]]]]]
- 3) a. The owner left early, Jason, because he has to work tomorrow.
b. [_{TopP} [_{TP} The owner left early *t_j*]_{*i*} [_{AddrP} Jason [_{FocP} [_{PP} because he has to work tomorrow]_{*j*} [_{ForceP} *t_i*]]]]]

The present study found that this prediction is borne out. Participants were asked to rate the stimuli on an acceptability scale of 1-10. The average rating of sentences such as those in (2) with island-interior vocatives was 2.70 (SD 1.51), while sentences with island-exterior mid-sentential vocatives, such as those in (3), were rated an average of 6.25 (SD 0.90). This difference was found to be statistically significant to $p < 2^{-16}$ in a two tailed unpaired t-test.

In addition to adjunct islands, this study also tested subject islands, coordinate structure constraint and wh-islands. In all cases, island-exterior mid-sentential vocatives were rated higher than island-interior vocatives at a statistically significant level.

References

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